

## THE INFORMATION AND ADVICE CENTRE OF MONT LA SALLE – BEIRUT

**Br. Felix Fiamingo**

Helping young people to find their place in life and, in particular, in university life, implies the provision of careful follow-up. The urgent need for this kind of follow-up became clear after a couple of careers advice talks given to 6th form students (Grade 12). That was in December 1981. The following year, we set up the first structures of an Information & Advice Centre.

### What is the situation at present?

The 3rd year (Grade 9) comes at the end of a period of observation, during which a psychologist counsellor gathers information about the intellectual abilities of pupils and, within the framework of psychological counselling sessions, attempts to deal with existing problems. There are pupils, for example, who shine at examinations, but are complete failures in class because of problems with relationships. There are others for whom failure can lead to an inappropriate career choice.

In the 4th year (Grade 10), Career Interest tests are introduced. These help to discover the true aspirations of pupils, and make it possible to compare the ambitions of the pupil with his real abilities. At this stage, the pupil who has just transferred from the middle to the secondary school, finds himself at a real turning-point in his life. Often, the advice he is given is incomplete or tainted by preconceived ideas: social pressures, family prejudice, the urge to make a lot of money fast, infatuation with the latest trend. In the face of all these pressures, choice of career is often haphazard.

This is where my role comes in. I help pupils to abandon decisions that cannot be justified, and to clarify or rectify the basic motivations that lie behind choices. In a word, I try to reduce the margin of error as far as possible.

### Careers advice, properly so called, from the 4th year onwards

This is a problem I have come across at meetings of various committees, and I try my best to find a solution by involving parents, because their opinion carries great weight when it comes to choices.

In my first letter, I remind parents that their child's career will not necessarily fulfil their (the parents') ambitions and dreams. I invite them to get to know their children better, to discover their real abilities and their personal preferences, by observing how they study and how they spend their free time, both at home and with friends.

Next I explain the 3 options that are available from the secondary school onwards. I stress how difficult the science

option is. I am fully aware, however, how difficult it is to overcome the prejudices and demands of snobbery, and often it's a real problem when it comes to matching up the so-called abilities of the young man with the demands of university entrance exams.

### Three typical cases

– The parents come along for the interview, but without their son who, they think, is too young to decide for himself. Since he is good at natural sciences, they think he'd make a good doctor, or a computer engineer, since he often uses his father's computer. As I said before, the demands of snobbery are difficult to overcome, and there's a risk that some superficial criteria will determine a child's whole future, without his even being asked his opinion. I find out that the boy has become moody and aggressive and is losing interest in his studies. It is obvious that the problem is more than one of careers advice. I cut short the interview and insist on meeting the boy.

– A mother brings her 4th year son, who is very shy. I try to put him at his ease, but from my very first question to him, it's the mother who answers. I ask her to let her son answer. I ask my next question, and the son mumbles something while looking at his mother...Well, it takes a good quarter of an hour to relax the atmosphere. The umbilical cord is obviously still in place! Later I see the boy alone, and then together with his mother for a progress report.

– "Dear Brother, Thank you for the interest you are showing in my son. Yes, he's been thinking of doing the T.S. course in electronics for a long time. It's not what we really want for him. We won't oppose him, but..."

At the same time as I send a letter to the parents, I distribute another to the pupils and comment on it in class. I explain the meaning of such words as aptitude, preference, ambition. I draw their attention to their capacity for work and the way they spend their free time.

Later, I explain the three types of courses that exist in secondary schools:

– the baccalaureat in technology, with its 20 or so special options. I explain the advantages of T.S. higher studies (short course).  
– the baccalaureat in Arts and the baccalaureat in Sciences, leading to a vast number of university courses and corresponding careers. Once again I point out the laws of selection and the various hurdles that have to be crossed if a science course is chosen.

Next, I hold interviews with pupils who ask for them. During the interview with the pupil, we chat about his family, the parents' profession, examination results and extra-curricular activities. As we speak, I soon discover the main characteristics of his developing personality, with its strengths and weaknesses. It then becomes easy to advise him and appeal to the positive side of his nature.

### Looking after secondary school pupils

Pupils moving up from the primary to the middle school, and from the middle to the secondary school face a similar problem: that of adapting to new working methods.

At the beginning of the school year, I give a number of talks to my 5th year students (Grade 11). The first talk centres on methods of assimilation of new knowledge and creating new structures, given favourable physical and psy-

chological conditions. I stress the role of the unconscious in this process, the need to be able to arrange data in logical patterns, and, in particular, the importance of planning.

My second talk deals with careers counselling properly so called. It does so under three headings:

- Profound factors on which motives are based.
- Choice of professions grouped according to 3 different types of activity: Organisation, Research, Relations.
- Making a success of one's life (personal and home).

I take the opportunity to broach the question of employment. Prospective employers will, of course, take qualifications into account, but even more so the person qualified: his general culture, linguistic ability, ability to relate to others, experience of working as part of a team (hence the importance of group activities), ability to cope and tact.

### **Careers advice sessions**

This important aspect of all careers counselling is reserved for 1st and 2nd year 6th formers (Grade 12 & 13). It is in the 1st year of the 6th that things seem to fall into place regarding careers.

The speakers at these sessions are specialists representing a variety of professions, and heads of university faculties in Lebanon. They speak about both the positive and negative aspects of their respective professions, the abilities required, courses of study necessary and possible job openings. Each talk is followed by a period of discussion. A printed session report is available at the Centre.

### **The last piece of advice**

Finally, I give a farewell talk to the 2nd year 6th on the surprises that await them at university as well as the opportunities that it offers.

## **What does the Information & Advice Centre offers its clients?**

### **First step: Information.**

#### **Information about:**

- possibilities offered by universities in Lebanon and abroad
- entrance requirements, method of application, entrance examinations

#### **Documents for consultation:**

- Careers and S.N. Studies Guide (Lebanon)
- Guide to university programmes in the Near East (AMIDEAST)
- Catalogues, brochures, leaflets from institutes of technology, the 7 universities of Lebanon, and various cultural centres (6 countries).
- Publications from ONISEP, L'ETUDIANT, CEDUST, AMIDEAST, BARRON'S, PETERSON'S, USJ, AUB, BUC.
- Analytical tables showing various careers and their offshoots, the qualifications required by various universities and institutes, possibilities of employment.
- Cassettes with careers advice talks.

I try to keep all these documents up to date. I occasionally have the pleasure of receiving very interesting documents from Mont La Salle former students.

### **Documents to take away**

- pre-enrolment and enrolment forms
- programme and specimen copies of various university entrance examinations
- Printed copies of talks given (social sciences, arts, humanities, economics and management, law and politics, advertising, architecture, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, faculty of science, faculty of public health, engineering (UL), engineering (USJ), agronomy, AUB, ALBA, BUC, NDU, USEK...)

### **Second step: Orientation.**

#### **Careers advice properly so called**

To give you some idea of what goes on, I'll give you a list of entries from my diary for the last fortnight:

- Mediterranean agronomy, Zahle-USJ. Boarders?
- We're all leaving for Canada, so...
- Are you really suggesting I take up technical studies?
- A word of recommendation for the BUC
- We have been accepted for a students' agronomy course in France
- I can't study any more. I can't remember anything.
- Hotel management course in France
- First disappointment in love
- UL, ESIB, FFM examinations
- AUB extension programme
- I don't get on at home any more
- I want to become a priest
- Aptitude and placement test
- I want to do a BT in electronics, but my father doesn't want me to
- Computer sciences and business computer studies

To the above list I can add the drop-outs from science courses who need to be placed on short courses.

Then, there are the drop-outs from arts courses who need to be shown other possibilities.

There is also the case of exam failures or those still getting over the shock of having to repeat a year.

So there you have the picture of a one-man band who has two half hours per day plus the weekend. But...there's many a slip between cup and lip! All this is simply the groundwork. You can't leave it at that. Careers guidance is a gamble because what you really need is:

- The effective collaboration of form masters, who are better placed than anybody else to provide the necessary follow up, to stimulate ambitions and desires, to draw attention to certain forms of behaviour and misbehaviour.
- A solution to a relatively high failure rate at school. It's pointless talking about careers to those who have accepted they are failures.
- Guided tours to introduce young people to the world of work and production.
- Offering pupils a chance to discover their skills by means of various activities within the school framework.
- Enhance the value of technical studies on the national level, giving them finally the status they enjoy everywhere else.
- To have access to up-to-date statistics of job market trends to help young people find employment.

I said it was a gamble! The only good thing I have done is to be available and to offer somewhere to come to with no conditions imposed. Our young people need to know that there is someone prepared to listen, who is not involved in the school timetable, who can be seen without an appointment, who perhaps can be there just at the moment when the success of their life is at stake. ●