

Education and training questions

General Issues

- Does EU action, as opposed to national government action, in the areas of education and vocational training generally benefit or disadvantage the UK? Can you point us to any published evidence or analysis in support of your view?

In general, I would say that the work on the promotion of mobility through programmes such as ERASMUS has benefited the UK – both students and education institutions.

On policy co-ordination I would say that the emphasis should be on exchange of best practice. The shift over time to a more prescriptive approach of targets underpinned by ever increasing reporting requirements and leading to both general and country specific recommendations is neither welcome (from a competence creep point of view) nor useful (from a policy point of view).

See below for further comments.

- Are there any specific EU activities in the areas of education and training that you consider particularly beneficial or particularly disadvantageous to the UK?
- Do you think the EU, as opposed to national government, should do more or less in relation to education and training? If so, where and why?
- What other areas of EU competence or activity have an impact on education and training in your sector and how?
- What challenges or opportunities are there for the UK in further EU action on education?
- What international bodies or arrangements other than the EU are important to education and training in the UK? How does your experience of dealing with them compare with the EU's activity in this sphere?

The Programmes

- For the specific programmes which are funded and managed via the EU (such as Erasmus or Leonardo), what are the benefits or disadvantages of having EU rather than national responsibility and funding for these activities?

On the whole, these programmes benefit the UK. Universities value the ERASMUS programme both from the point of view of student mobility and strengthening the educational/academic offer. Schools value the emphasis on languages and the mobility and exchange opportunities for students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programmes aimed at the adult/vocational education sector are less well developed and constrained by issues such as cost (to employers), time and family commitments (for students).

But these are worthwhile activities and natural and sensible areas for cooperation at EU level not least because, whilst sensible, they would not be a priority for national funding.

I assessed the EU's work on developing frameworks to promote mutual recognition of qualifications as broadly helpful. It has probably had some positive impact on supporting student and labour mobility. I thought that this was sensible EU cooperation provided that the objectives remained focused on promoting transparency and equivalence and not convergence or an attempt to influence quality of education through control of qualifications.

- Can you point to evidence which shows that language learning has improved through participation in the programmes?

See above. I am not aware of hard evidence but it is reasonable to assume, for example, that the presence of European Foreign Language Assistants in schools has had a positive impact on language learning.

- How would you describe the costs and benefits to your organisation of participating in the programmes?

It is always possible to reduce cost and bureaucracy. But there are clear overall benefits here (see above)

Policy Coordination

- Have you noticed any change in EU activity or emphasis since the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon and the introduction of Europe 2020, and, if so, where has this manifested itself and in what ways? Have these changes been helpful or unhelpful?

Yes. There has been a significant increase in EU activity in education since the agreement of the Lisbon Strategy and its successor, Europe 2020. This has followed an emphasis on education as a key factor in labour market and therefore economic policy, and therefore competitiveness. This development has not always been welcomed by Member States who have historically seen education as very much a national issue, closely associated with national and sub-national culture and values.

Has this been helpful? Policy and best practice exchange can be helpful (see below). But where there has been a tendency towards “one size fits all” approaches – as in some Council Recommendations and Conclusions – this is unhelpful. Texts of this kind are too general and too heavily caveated to be of use, or not specific enough to take account of individual national circumstances. This is why EU policy co-operation is most useful when it is limited to exchange of best practice and policy ideas.

- Is it appropriate that Europe 2020 focusses on early school leaving and the completion of tertiary education?

These are reasonable proxies for policy exchange but rather limited. They do not, for example, take account of the quality and duration of tertiary education

- Has the adoption of EU education policy frameworks or Council Recommendations had any impact on your sector?

I would say that they are almost invisible to the education sector. In higher education for example, Universities are very protective of their status as autonomous institutions. Interference from national governments is unwelcome, never mind from Brussels. As an example, I can say that as a board member of a University I can see little visibility or relevance. As a former civil servant I saw a steady flow of EU texts of this nature, but would say they had very little impact on policymaking.

- How does policy cooperation on education in the EU compare with other organisations, for example the OECD?

There is no doubt that the OECD work on education has a major impact, both on policymakers and on the education profession - much greater than the EU in the education field. The publication of PISA surveys is a clear example and has had a direct impact on the pace and direction of reform in several EU countries, including the UK.

- Can you point to examples of reform in national policy which have resulted from EU co-operation in education and training?

- How would you assess the costs and benefits to policy makers of participation in education policy cooperation at EU level?

My experience was that EU policy co-operation was all rather marginal. There were certainly some examples of useful mutual learning. But it was never clear to me whether this added much value to bilateral contact. In some ways, there was some indirect benefit to the UK of going through the process of articulating and explaining our major reforms – such as the Academy and Free Schools Programme - to others. I can think of times when some of the feedback from other EU countries on their own experience was helpful and passed on to policy specialists by the EU teams.