

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?

No, except for participation in ERASMUS+ and predecessor programmes.

Are there any specific EU activities in the areas of education and training that you consider particularly beneficial or particularly disadvantageous to the UK?

Only participation in ERASMUS+ and predecessor programmes.

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?

Less, for reasons explained in attached text.

What other areas of EU competence or activity have an impact on education and training in your sector and how?

None as yet, but the single market and employment competences could impinge in the future.

What challenges or opportunities are there for the UK in further EU action on education?

To prevent 'competence creep'.

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?

OECD has had a far greater and more positive impact through its development of PISA international comparisons of student performance.

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?

Without EU funding there would be significantly fewer opportunities for UK students to spend time in other countries.

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

Language assistants are widely welcomed in UK schools.

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

Positive.

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?

Policy coordination activities at EU level are invisible to UK schools.

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

These are real problems, but there is nothing the EU can do about them beyond facilitating an exchange of experience between Member States.

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

No.

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

Ineffective and largely irrelevant.

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

No.

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

Benefits nil. Costs: administrative burden on DfE (see below text).

REVIEW OF BALANCE OF COMPETENCES

EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND YOUTH

These comments are based on my experience as a previous Director of international business of the Education Department and my observation of developments since then.

EU EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

These programmes, which have operated under various titles since the 1980s and which are intended to promote student and teacher mobility across Europe and the take up of language teaching, have been generally welcomed by schools and students and have performed a valuable role in widening the horizons of students and teachers.

The persistent 'imbalance' between the number of students from other countries who choose to come to the UK and the number of UK students who go to other countries is, in my view, not something which should cause us undue concern. It is, of course, important to encourage young people in the UK to take up these opportunities (not least to ensure that the UK recovers the cost of its EU financial contribution). However, the large numbers from other countries who choose the UK as their destination do so primarily because of the importance they attach to being able to speak the English language and to experiencing the UK at first hand. We should welcome this as a recognition of our national assets.

POLICY CO-ORDINATION AT EU LEVEL

For most of its existence the Education Council has functioned as a 'secret garden': an invisible, low-level talking shop, without power or even influence, rarely attended by senior Ministers from any Member State. This has reflected the very limited competence of the EU in education and the consequently low priority the European Commission has attached to the Council and, indeed, to the topic of education itself. This has been reinforced by the strong aversion of Member States to any external interference in their national education policies.

Traditionally, discussions at the Education Council were innocent of any suggestion that EU Member States might have anything significant to learn from each other. Still less were they likely to acknowledge that their schools might not be keeping pace with developments outside Europe and that the antiquity of universities in France, Germany and Italy was no longer matched by the quality of the education they provided (in comparison, for example, with the USA).

Perhaps even more important was an implicit acceptance that, for a variety of reasons (including the devolution of responsibility for school education to regions and the entrenched power of trade unions in many countries), the prospect of EU action achieving any significant change in national education systems is vanishingly small. Even if the need for such change can be demonstrated, the political cost of trying to achieve it would be more than the great majority of EU Member States would be prepared to pay: the potential rewards would be too intangible; and the short-term cost of taking on vested interests all too clear.

More recently the Education Council's ethos of complacent inactivity has come under pressure as a result of two developments. First, PISA and other international comparisons produced by OECD have made it increasingly difficult to ignore the differences in achievement between EU school systems (other than the Finnish) and those of Chinese-speaking and other Asian countries. Secondly, the priority the European Council is now according to issues of economic competitiveness through the "European Semester" has inevitably begun to focus attention on skills and qualifications.

The Education Directorate of the European Commission (always sensitive to the OECD's well-earned prestige in education policy and to its own relatively lowly status within the Commission) saw its opportunity. The result is the burgeoning of Commission-led attempts at establishing a measure of educational policy coordination at EU level.

This clearly involves an element of 'competence creep'. Benchmarks and indicators, which were originally explained as necessary to compare progress, have become targets. 'Co-ordination' has moved to a target-driven strategy with both EU and national targets, 'national reports' and 'country recommendations'. 'General Council Recommendations' - as opposed to the traditional 'Conclusions' and 'Recommendations' which were dead letters as soon as they had been agreed - are becoming more common, and may be harder (although not impossible) to shrug off. They are claimed by the Commission to have 'legal effect', although it is unclear what this might imply.

What is this likely to mean in practice?

First, the impact - for good or ill - on any national education policies is likely to be slight. This is essentially for the same reasons that have restricted EU competence in education (see above). The whole exercise of 'policy co-ordination' is both instigated and consumed by bureaucracies in Brussels and nationally, without the involvement of teachers or anyone else actually engaged in delivering education. Unlike the work of OECD, it is almost entirely unnoticed by the world of education. To this extent, there is - and will continue to be - even less to the whole process than meets the eye of an insider.

Secondly, unlike other areas of national policy, it is inconceivable that 'competence creep' in the area of education will lead to any formal extension of competence in education. Resistance to EU-led change at national level - and particularly to any effective outside interference which might create pressure for change - is simply too firmly entrenched. Education policy is not a priority in any Member State except the UK, and no Member State is interested in paying more than lip service to the notion that national education policies should, in any meaningful sense, be 'co-ordinated' at EU level. The ignominious, if predictable, fate of the well-intentioned proposal to create a 'European MIT' illustrates clearly how difficult it is for the EU to undertake cross-border educational initiatives in the teeth of national educational interests and jealousies.

Does this mean that 'competence creep' in the area of education policy can be safely ignored? The answer is "No" for two reasons.

First, as experience has already shown, the Commission-led processes of 'policy co-ordination' inevitably create work for Member States. Most of this work is essentially unproductive damage prevention but the burden is not insignificant.

Secondly, active engagement in the process is necessary, not only to ensure that national policies are not misrepresented but also to guard against the possibility that the Commission will try to develop policy instruments which could have a national impact through being linked to EU programmes (such as ERASMUS + and the European Social Fund) over which they have a substantial measure of control or to other policy areas, such as employment or the single market, where competence is well established.