



EU Balance of Competence Review of Education, Vocational Training and Youth

Stakeholder event – Brussels
18 June 2014

- The event took place under Chatham House rules with individuals with experience working within the EU framework on behalf of their Member States and representatives of third sector organisations.
- One speaker agreed that the EU should focus on combatting youth unemployment and promotion of mobility.
- On the overall balance of competence, one speaker felt the Treaty did not provide for much coordination, and what there was took place under employment and training. That speaker suggested that there should be a stronger EU competence which would help push things through nationally. Another speaker agreed with this suggestion. A third suggested that the EU does not have enough instruments to tackle the most pressing question, that of youth unemployment, but added that this is of course a very political question.
- Another speaker reported that their attitude changed when their country held the Presidency, because they needed the Commission's support to get their own agenda through and there are limits to what the Presidency can do without Commission support. Another believed there must not be short term tools, but effective modernisation and wider basic skills; this speaker referred to the 'shocking' PIACC finding that 1 in 4 EU adults were innumerate and illiterate: it was not for business to fix this.
- New CSRs linked to the Eurozone macroeconomic imbalance procedure (MIP) changes things. One country said this had impacted legislative reform (on early school leaving and VET, where they had introduced a kind of dual system) – but they had to use national funding, there was none from the Commission.
- Asked if the youth guarantee, traineeships, country-specific recommendations (CSRs) etc. were burdensome, there was concern reported with regard to trainees' remuneration and the requirement to follow them subsequently, but it was also noted the Commission was responsive and adapted the proposal so it could be supported.
- Speakers noted that recent initiatives and the CSRs have a joint legal base wider than education. Education subsidiarity prevents too much coordination. One speaker would prefer more EU competence in this area so as to drive reform such as the domestic policy dealing with employers. Another representative agreed that an EU perspective helps local authorities with policies on skills and youth employment.

- CSRs have had an impact on policy reform such as Vocational Education (VE) and Training reform in Member States– introduced the idea of dual training. They have had no impact however in the domestic use of ESF funding.
- Asked about the impact of the Council recommendation on traineeships it was suggested that the impact is seen in the longer term, up to ten years; the EQF and EQAR were cited as further examples. One speaker had felt the recommendation was too theoretical and should have been grounded in real workplaces – but it turned out most of the items in the recommendation were happening in practice in the speaker's country, so it felt reassured it was in the mainstream. Another speaker said it had had an impact, but their country didn't adopt all of it, and it had helped it to fulfil its CSRs; it was the case that a recent change of government had since deleted education for citizenship, which was in the CSRs, as an item in the curriculum, but in practice the elements were retained but spread around the curriculum. Another speaker noted there was often a long window for implementation, e.g. the recommendation on formal and informal learning of 2012 did not have to be implemented until 2018. Though recommendations are not binding, they can create a minimum standard. The employers' organisation was concerned about the burden on SMEs of the traineeships and youth guarantee proposals, the proposals need to be accompanied by reform of domestic systems to have an impact.
- However, though the Directive on recognition of professional qualifications had looked easy, there were problems with the EQF. The speaker said it was very technically difficult to implement in the national context (this may have been because the country has a devolved education system.)
- A national rep remarked that it was difficult to tell when issues will be discussed in Committee or Council, partly because employment takes priority over education. Others disagreed, the Council is one and if necessary education measures could be adopted by for example the Agriculture Council. However, it was noted by several speakers that education Committee/Council involvement is insufficient. CSRs cover education but there is no formal input to them from education officials.
- Asked about 'multilateral review' – do other Member States have a real opportunity to look at UK CSRs? – it was felt that this depended on national organisation, but it needed a very high (or 'extreme') degree of internal coordination. What goes wrong in other Member States does need attention as it can affect others, including financially. It was noted that devolved administrations have their own National Reform Plans annexed to their Member State's, but CSRs are often too generally addressed to be useful to local government.
- EQF was said to be valuable as it has a learning outcomes approach; it helps vocational parity of esteem and mobility, even internal mobility; but whether more EU activity here would help depended on the next Commission. One speaker queried a CSR on youth education after the youth left education; it was much easier to fix the problem during schooling and recommendations should reflect that.
- Speakers noted that the frameworks for recognition of training and qualifications have had an impact a national level but it is slow going and will take years before they have full effect.
- Asked if EU programmes contribute to employability one contributor said they did, but Vocational Education lags behind and there is a lack of support for SMEs. VE provision did

not reflect the amount of apparent mobility. Learning mobility does lead to employment mobility. The UK benefited from student and labour mobility.

- A speaker valued the EU as a neutral and impartial arbiter to ensure quality, citing East Asia as an unfavourable example (there was no appetite for an Erasmus style scheme as it would have been Japanese-administered). They added that EU funding made such things possible, especially for smaller Member States or those with fewer recourses. Others agreed but said it depends on the State concerned whether it made things better or worse. If it was clear why information required in return was needed and what it will be used for, it can be useful.
- Speakers noted the benefits of EU action – new MSs did not have policies on education and training and the council Recommendations provide a framework even though they are not binding. – Adult education didn't exist in some MS and the programmes have driven its introduction. - The sharing of good practice helps confirm if your country's policies are correct.
- Asked how the EU compared to the OECD with regard to information requests, no-one could say but they felt it depended on the EU or OECD's image in their country. There was scope for reducing reporting. It was felt there certainly was duplication of work, but that was true domestically too and it is the nature of any bureaucracy. One speaker indeed felt more demanding questions would help their country with apprenticeships.
- Asked whether continuation of historical trends for more EU competence/ activity, perhaps via the MIP, would be a good thing, most said they didn't know; one remarked that their country lacked the absorption capacity for youth guarantee, and it had required domestic fundraising. General view was that the new Commission is likely to make education and training more visible in the semester process. Youth employment will stay on the agenda.
- A speaker noted all this must be seen in the context of education moving towards being more market-driven and cross-border. Others agreed, one noting the possibility that TTIP would cover education.