



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

Stakeholder event – Scotland Office, Edinburgh
28 May 2014

The points noted below are presented in the order they were raised and discussed during the meeting.

- EU focus in the area of education has a learning outcomes focus. This mirrors the focus which has a long history in the UK. As a result, the focus at an EU level has limited relevance to the UK but does have more relevance to nations with a less well developed history of learning outcomes focus in education, such as Romania.
- There is a perception that some areas of funding reward projects or developments which are designed to enhance the outcomes based approach. This potentially disadvantages the UK as most areas of development within the UK are not outcomes focused (because that focus already has an entrenched position). As such, it was felt that that funding could be of more use in the UK if there was a stronger focus on, for example, recognition of prior or non-formal learning. This is an area where opportunities exist for sharing best practice and cooperation, but not significantly for funding.
- The biggest challenge from the perspective of organisations operating in a devolved context is the treatment of the UK as a single entity by EU authorities. This does not recognise the additional time taken for devolved agencies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England to cooperate. This has an impact on responding to reporting or responding deadlines, but also to applications for funding. It would be helpful if there was increased recognition of these additional demands in the UK context when it comes to organisations operating at a devolved level, particularly in the setting of deadlines and timeframes. It was noted that some other countries with specific constitutional arrangements, such as Belgium, experienced similar issues, while others, with more recognised federal systems, such as Germany did not.
- In respect of mobility, the view was expressed that the lack of short term options, particularly with Erasmus, was partially responsible for low participation in the UK. Existing mobility experience lengths do not fit easily with UK term time, and there would be a value to have more flexible options. Similarly, it was recognised that UK higher education institutes (HEIs) could do more to change their term times to allow greater participation. Similarly, it was noted that HEI international exchange offices were frequently over stretched and that increased capacity may be beneficial to participation rates. The move to include wider-world mobility experiences within Erasmus+ was welcome, and it was felt that this would help boost participation in the UK, but funding was considered too low and the basis of funding (past participation in Erasmus) was considered likely to prevent the change from having a significant impact.
- There was a view that participation in Comenius was healthy, particularly in respect of those undertaking teacher training, but that while the quality of experiences was generally good, it

could be inconsistent. Nonetheless, teachers were affected by the same lack of congruency between term times and mobility opportunities.

- There was widespread agreement that mobility experiences, when undertaken, were highly positive in developing perspectives, offering new and unique learning opportunities and assisting with language skills. However there was some concern about the extent to which mobility experiences are accessible to those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.
- There was agreement that EU information sharing was useful in conjunction with OECD data sharing. In particular, European Monitors, country profiles through Eurydice and qualitative overviews from CEDEFOP were all considered useful for organisations which hosted international visitors. Examples where information sharing had been useful to participants included learning about the treatment of informal learning in the Dutch system.
- There was, however, widespread disagreement with EU activity to develop its own university ranking system, Multirank. There was a feeling that the ranking offered an incomplete picture and was not a sound basis on which students should be making decisions, that it did not represent a good use of money – notwithstanding the accepted position of the rankings being self-financed by HEIs. There was a view that even if the practicalities of Multirank were positive, that there was limited value to the EU involving itself in this area where a wide range of comparisons and rankings of HEIs was already available.
- There was a feeling that the reporting processes involved at higher and vocational education levels imposed a heavy burden on agencies and institutes, particularly smaller ones. This also applied at a policy level in terms of decisions taken at steering groups and other decision making forums at EU level. The point was made that the perception of this administrative burden depends on national priorities – for example, the Netherlands considers this area of work a high priority and therefore are considered broadly content with the administrative workload involved. However there was also a sense that reporting requirements often existed for their own sake, with no direct value added and little streamlining. As such, there was a sense that the burden could be lightened without a negative impact on the processes in which the EU is involved. There was a view that this burden had a deterrent effect particularly on smaller organisations who did not have the administrative capacity to cope with the burden associated with applying for even small amounts of funding. There was a suggestion that a more appropriate balance should be struck between financial prudence and accessibility of funding by smaller organisations.
- There was concern that the consultation on the European Area for Skills represented a proposal to expand the existing competence. There was a view that the EU's objectives should focus on mobility and languages, but a perception that the European Commission was seeking to move beyond that and become involved in a wider area of general education policy.
- Finally, there was also a view that existing programmes (both in terms of qualification recognition frameworks and Erasmus+) should be allowed time to have an impact and only then be subject to an evaluation. There was a perception, which delegates was shared internationally, that the EU Commission applied undue pressure for the development of new tools or initiatives while existing ones are still being implemented. This risked creating an unsustainable cycle which would undermine the benefits of effective tools and initiatives.
- The Scottish Government wished to place on the record its commitment to EU membership and its belief that its activity in education, training and youth was ultimately positive and beneficial.