



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

Stakeholder event – London (Parliamentary Event)
8 July 2014

Introduction

A meeting was held to discuss the Balance of Competence from the perspective of legislators. The event was open to any Peer or MP and specific invitations were sent to members of relevant Select Committees and All Party Political Groups. The event was chaired by Minister of State, Matthew Hancock MP under Chatham House rules.

The following are the key points which were raised.

Key Points

- A number of members expressed the view that the EU had exceeded its competence in the field of education, training and youth. One questioned why there was any EU competence in education at all, and therefore why there was a need for a BOCR report. Another suggested that initiatives which started with loose frameworks, analysis and benchmarks often turned into targets and more prescriptive approaches over time. They considered that competence had expanded unhelpfully through a series of policies or initiatives which were unnecessary.
- There was a view that even voluntary initiatives were not fully voluntary since funding was increasingly linked to compliance. The example was given of the Youth Guarantee, which was agreed on a non-binding basis and which the UK has chosen not to implement. The extent to which it is non-binding was questioned, as funding under the Youth Employment Initiative was linked to implementation of the Youth Guarantee. It was considered inappropriate that EU funds should be conditional on implementation of a non-binding initiative.
- It was suggested by one attendee that even with non-binding initiatives, there was a risk of them not being formally opposed, even where member states disagreed, as formal opposition of measures always involved a use of political capital which could be better used elsewhere. Another attendee agreed, and suggested that the non-binding nature of initiatives may be misleading if Ministers or Member States came under pressure to implement initiatives.
- One view expressed was that comparisons and sharing best practice did not require EU involvement, and that the UK had more to learn from other countries, such as Asian nations and the United States. Another attendee considered that the EU was involved in duplicating the work of the OECD but doing so less effectively and with unnecessary cost.

- One member, however, said that rankings showed that the UK did have much to learn from European education systems and that our focus should be how to get the best out of our relationship with the EU in this field.
- It was felt that it is important to recognise the cost of our involvement in EU coordination of education policy, and that this must include the costs associated with interpretation, administration and bureaucracy.
- One attendee questioned the cost to the taxpayer of free movement of EU students. The point made was that EU students were entitled to student loans, but also had a higher rate of non-repayment than domestic students, creating a cost for the taxpayer. A similar question was raised about the impact on UK schools arising from teaching students who were in the UK on foot of the free movement of people within the EU.
- There was also agreement that the situation whereby EU students could study in Scotland at the same rate as home students while English students pay fees was unfair and was a result of inconsistent treatment of the right of free movement by the EU.
- On EU mobility programmes, one attendee expressed the view that these should be decided on and managed at a national level, and that Member States should be free to fund mobility programmes as they saw fit and to control funding for students to go abroad and for international students to have mobility experiences in the UK. It was considered by the attendee that such programmes were designed less with the interests of the participants in mind, and were more focused on promoting the EU and EU interests.
- One member thought it was a problem that EU education programmes were designed not just to stimulate mobility, but to promote the EU itself
- Another attendee supported the concept of the programmes but suggested that poor language skills amongst UK students limited their capacity to engage in mobility experiences, and that language training and education should be a priority. It was suggested that an exercise in seeking the best balance of competence could not be fully effective without national policy that enabled the UK to make the most of the opportunities offered by EU programmes.