



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

Stakeholder event – London
6 June 2014

The event was split into three groups to discuss the same themes. The note which follows is a combined note of all three discussions.

What should the EU focus on?

- From an FE perspective EU policy co-ordination should focus on sharing approaches to education, employment and entrepreneurial skills. Bruges communiqué was a positive thing.
- Focus on citizenship was generally seen as positive but questioned what was meant by ‘citizenship’ at EU level? People thought that a focus on citizenship was useful if it equipped young people and practitioners with skills.
- Another EU priority was mobility. The meaning of the term mobility was discussed and it was recognised as something which helped young people and workers move around but more importantly that it aided development of transferable, recognised skills. Though people believed this could be delivered effectively at national level too.
- Someone noted that EU activities to support mobility, such as exchanges and international trips, often had a negative reputation as people perceived these as being holidays rather than something more valuable. The group felt that in fact these experiences helped young people develop global and holistic mindsets.
- Polls of businesses show a general desire for less EU involvement in policy on the ground that the national level is closer/ more accessible.
- Although Education is a very limited EU competence, the sector is impacted by EU activity in other areas, such as VAT, free movement of workers, and for cross-border education the single market.
- Although there was some support for the view that EU targets could be useful, it was felt that for cultural reasons locally set targets would be easier to achieve in the UK, but noted other Members States may have different perspectives on targets.

Programmes

- The group felt there was lots of potential but that greater value for money and greater impact achieved from funding programmes such as Erasmus+. BC reported that take-up of the Youth in Action programme was lower in the UK than you might

expect. Young people are more aware of national schemes, though they may know the names of EU schemes - Jobcentres do not, though. Others thought some European schemes (Erasmus was mentioned) were so successful that their European origin was not noticed – so European schemes should not be judged simply by their visibility.

- Others felt that UK apprenticeship schemes were little known, or not valued, so it was unsurprising EU VE and youth schemes were not known/rated.
- In a discussion on value for money of EU education activities it was suggested that there were no figures available for the return on EU apprenticeships, for which the 20% target was most unlikely to be met by the UK. Others thought this was more a cultural problem as it is easy to compare UK apprenticeships with US or Australian ones.
- It was suggested that value for money should be seen in terms of additionality rather than return on investment, i.e. would it happen without EU money.
- There was agreement that it was difficult to conceive of mobility experiences being organised at a bilateral level. But there was a view that they do not have to be undertaken by the EU, giving the example of Bologna which is operated multinationally but outside the framework of the EU. However, where significant resources were needed it was considered that only the EU could provide them.
- The group discussed the following challenges:
 - Many people and organisations in the UK were put off by the application process and felt they did not have time or resources to apply, whereas their counterparts in organisations in other Members States were more likely to have staff dedicated to applying to and managing EU programmes. They thought UK organisations could change their approach.
 - Programmes were very difficult for young people to apply for. One young person present said “I spent time trying to apply to Erasmus+ but I gave up because it was too long”.
 - The processes and application forms could be shortened and improved to make it simpler.
 - There was an attitudinal issue with people being put-off from applying by a perception of EU bureaucracy. Also many people did not know others who had successfully applied to EU programmes.
 - Another barrier was the language used by the EU and people thought more could be done to help translate this for UK applicants.
 - Programme carried a high burden of reporting which reduced the impact programmes could have made.
 - People felt it was a very positive move that the Erasmus+ application was all online and thought this may encourage more to apply. However, the IT system put in place by the EU was not that easy to use and could be simplified and made clearer.

Outcomes and impact of programmes

- The group said that those who had received EU funding tended to be very positive about it. They saw fantastic and transformational outcomes for individuals participating, both in the long-term and short-term.

- There was a need to ensure programmes were evaluated consistently, without losing sight of the individual case studies and stories.
- They discussed challenges around recognition of qualifications, without this they thought it was hard to achieve effective movement of labour and understanding of quality of achievements.
- The Euro Pass was mentioned as a tool. It was not used widely though.
- Similarly the Youth Pass was discussed as a measurement tool within Erasmus+. While it was agreed that employers and others need an easy mechanism to recognise young people's skills, the group saw room to improve the pass before it would be widely accepted in the UK.
- NYA were keen to use EU platforms to share expertise across Member States and to help others develop their practice and measurement of youth work.
- The group was informed that the EYF was doing a lot of work on the recognition of non-formal education and that other Member States bought in to this to a greater extent than the UK.
- With regard to Erasmus+ it was suggested there ought to be more freedom/ flexibility to use the money provided at Member State level.
- The Commission shows little recognition of the fact that education is devolved in several Member States. However, it does listen: for example work placements were included at UK request, resulting in an increase in UK participation. Appreciation was also expressed for EU support for the disadvantaged, which enabled their full participation.

Value for money

- The group felt that adequate information was not available to the youth sector in the UK to make that assessment entirely accurately. They thought the UK should think more about getting value for money from EU programmes.
- The group discussed bureaucracy and the need to ensure that funding was not being taken up through overly burdensome processes. They thought there was scope for EU programmes and policy co-ordination to be run more efficiently. For instance, it was noted that there were the same level of forms and reporting for small applications as much larger ones and that the volume of paperwork should be more proportionate.
- They thought the outcomes of Erasmus+ were the right ones to pursue and therefore it was a good use of money. They said that the programmes helped facilitate comparison and benchmarking across Member States.
- They thought checks and balances by the European Commission (EC) served to help protect tax payer money. Though they thought the EC was disproportionately risk adverse, such as needing all receipts under Youth in Action. The group saw that the EC was addressing this with changes to Erasmus+ such as receipts no longer being required and acceptance of electronic signatures. They called for more of these common sense approaches.

Impact of EU policy co-ordination

- They thought it did not have much effect on the UK as we could interpret EU policy suggestions however we wanted and choose not to act on things we did not like. They said it was hard to tell what impact EU policy co-ordination had in the field of youth. They said there was a lack of clarity on how the policy was formulated and what happened as a result.
- They thought that labour mobility meant there had to be some level of co-ordination with the EU and that it was a very positive thing for UK young people to be able to access opportunities across Member States.
- AoC said the EU did not have much impact on UK FE colleges. Though in other Member States the FE sector and youth sector did look to the EU for guidance.
- They saw best practice sharing as a positive output of EU activity but they thought policy statements were very aspirational and therefore not very instructive or helpful.
- Collaboration on youth policy was seen as useful where the EU focused on facilitating peer-to-peer learning. NYA thought EU policy co-ordination brought benefits for the UK in breaking down barriers and that it was positive from a perspective of improving youth work.
- They thought EU work to develop frameworks for the validation of non-formal learning was useful.
- It was considered possible that competence creep was occurring in education, for example in relation to the Bologna process. However, some of this arose from the desire of some Member States to get EU cover for unpopular reforms. It was important to avoid unintended administrative burdens or duplication.
- The point was made that one should include the impact on educational institutions of EU regulations e.g. on energy efficiency in buildings which was very costly for HEIs (especially ancient ones) and schools. But others disagreed that that was burdensome, and did not think EU activity was making UK innovation in the area harder.
- Similarly some felt the EU's Country Specific Recommendations for the UK had been helpful, but others felt that any EU imprimatur would damage the credibility of a proposal, however worthy the subject matter.

Structured Dialogue

- The group were generally positive about Structured Dialogue (SD) but unsure how effective it was. Several people said SD was improving at a national level but that it was important that the UK Government saw it as more of a priority and that decision makers took it seriously.
- They thought SD did achieve EU aims of participation in policy making but that because it was driven top-down from the EU level that SD did not necessarily focus on issues UK young people cared about.
- More clarity was called for as it was hard to understand how SD made a real difference to policy. Despite this it was seen as useful for young people to be involved even if policy did not change as a result.

Future direction

- Thought more could be done to build awareness of Erasmus+ and support diverse organisations to apply.
- EU should look at validating experience and non-formal learning as well as qualifications. There should be greater focus on measuring the outcomes rather than time spent learning something.
- They believed it was important to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach and to respect national differences. They thought EU frameworks were fine, so long as they were not binding and people could retain flexibility on whether and how to use frameworks. They thought the EC could afford to be more prescriptive in countries which might want EU help to develop in the field of youth, but not in the UK.
- They wanted to ensure that all young people in the EU could access support to develop skills. Though they thought that many young people were not even aware such opportunities existed through the EU. They said that the EC tended to talk at young people rather than to them and that this needed change.
- They thought national activities and policy suited domestic needs and that the EU could not achieve this. They welcomed collaboration and data sharing facilitated by the EU but they were clear that there should definitely not be a legal framework or any increase in competence.
- They noted that the EU did not have democratic accountability and they did not want to give more power to a body which they and young people could not hold to account.
- There was an issue with regard to UK students training for youth work in Germany, where it was regarded as a full profession and UK students as under-qualified. However the general opinion was that EU intervention would not be desirable, though some feeling that the threat of it might be useful.
- They said the EU should focus on practical things, such as achieving real impact through programmes, rather than on policy.
- There was agreement that more diverse learning should be encouraged at all levels and between levels.
- Non-binding targets could facilitate dialogue, but they needed to be framed correctly and address the diversity of the sector including devolution/ institutional autonomy. It was most important that activity was directed to added value. Others felt the EU was addressing duplication, and had reduced that and other burdens, and some even felt some EU initiatives should be copied domestically.
- There was little appetite for EU regulation, but concrete analysis to inform national policy could be very useful.
- One person noted recent remarks by Lord Heseltine about UK failure to take up EU funding, but it was felt this reflected difficulties for small organisations to access it; some felt there was a role for the Treasury here.
- The Commission representative observed that there was a current consultation on the future of Europe 2020, to which observations could be addressed until October.