

# European & External Affairs Committee

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**Date: 12 July 2006**

**Venue: Committee Room 2, Senedd, Cardiff Bay**

**Title: Education, lifelong learning issues in the European context**

### **Purpose**

1. To update the Committee on developments in the European Union in the field of education and lifelong learning. The Committee should note the contents of the paper for information.

### **Introduction**

2. The paper highlights how the EU's education and lifelong policies relate to Wales and how Wales is responding to the EU agenda.

3. A better educated, higher skilled population is a key component of the EU's jobs and growth strategy (the Lisbon agenda). At the EU summit on 23-24 March this year, EU leaders emphasised the centrality of education and training for European competitiveness and social cohesion stating that "investment in education and training produces high returns which substantially outweigh the costs". A recent EU survey suggests that the rate of return is on average above 7%.

To progress the Lisbon agenda Member States have agreed to strengthen co-operation in education and training through a process known as "Education and Training 2010". The EU Institutions, notably the European Commission, are increasingly recognising the need to engage with the "regional" and local level on education and lifelong learning given that they often have competence in these areas and can make a real contribution to the Lisbon strategy. Wales is a founder member of the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL) which is progressively being viewed as the main political voice for regions on education matters at EU level.

5. EARLALL is a network of 20 European regions that work in partnership on the development of new policies, strategies and methods for lifelong learning. Our vice-presidency of the Association reflects our conviction that significant benefits are to be gained from such joint working.

6. Membership of EARLALL has provided Wales with a platform to make its voice heard, alongside other like-minded regions, on the European stage. To this end EARLALL has, over the past year, strengthened its links with the EU Institutions and contributed to European policy development by providing comments on a wide range of proposals such as the future of the European Social Fund. Other activities include: convening a high-profile seminar in Brussels on "strengthening inter-regional co-operation in lifelong learning"; organising a number of joint projects and working to

develop bilateral and multilateral mobility agreements between member regions. Furthermore, as well as our membership of EARLALL, the bilateral Memoranda of Understanding which the First Minister has signed with several European regions cover education, lifelong learning and skills.

## **Education and Training 2010**

7. To implement the Lisbon agenda, in 2001 EU education ministers agreed on three major goals (improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems; accessibility; and opening up education and training to the wider world), a set of more detailed objectives and benchmarks to measure progress.

8. To take this work forward, the Commission and Council produce a bi-annual progress report, a process to which the Welsh Assembly contributes via the UK Government. Moreover, Member States organise in thematic "clusters" to exchange best practice – the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) plans to put forward a Welsh expert as the UK representative on the cluster dealing with access and social inclusion in lifelong learning. The WAG also participates in an EARLALL project on regional benchmarking of early school leavers and non-formal adult education and is exploring involvement in a parallel process of mutual learning, part of the European Employment Strategy focussing on human capital.

## **European Qualifications Framework**

8. The Commission plans to propose a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) this autumn, aiming to help employers in one member state understand the qualifications issued by another, so facilitating mobility for work and study. The Commission envisages a framework that will allow national and sectoral qualifications to be related to each other through a system of eight recognised "levels".

9. Wales is indeed in the forefront when it comes to credit and qualifications frameworks and can move forward with confidence in the European context. We have:

- participated in two projects with other EARLALL members aimed at developing ways of mutually recognising vocational competences.
- co-sponsored last September's UK Presidency conference in Glasgow on the EQF,
- responded to the consultation on EQF and spoke at the EQF Budapest conference in February 2006
- been involved in a European working group on credit.

10. Moreover, we are developing a bid to pilot EQF in response to a European call for proposals and I will highlight the Welsh experience of credit and qualification frameworks at a conference to be held in Brussels this autumn.

## **European Credit Transfer system for VET**

11. Linked to EQF is the Credit Transfer system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

supporting recognition of periods of training abroad. Within the context of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, we have been using European funding to support major UK awarding bodies in credit-rating their vocational qualifications and therefore expect to play a role in developing European thinking in this field.

## **Entrepreneurship education**

12. The recent Commission proposal on this topic is a tool for Member States when reviewing progress of their educational reforms. Wales has notified the Commission of its work in this area, notably its Youth Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Strategy and its Project Dynamo, which sit in our Entrepreneurship Action Plan. In the autumn EARLALL will also be taking stock of the range of approaches toward entrepreneurship education.

## **Adult education**

13. The European Commission will shortly propose a set of political messages underlining the importance of adult education together with an action plan containing examples of good practice (examples from Wales have already been sent) and recommendations on improving quality and access.

## **Key competences for Lifelong Learning**

14. Education Ministers and MEPs are in the process of adopting a recommendation entitled "key competences for lifelong learning" which set out the essential skills, knowledge and attitudes that every European should have like digital competence. The WAG's policies on skills and competences are broadly aligned with this proposal.

## **Higher Education**

15. During the UK Presidency, EU leaders agreed that the Union should focus its efforts on six priorities which included university reform and boosting research and development. In response, the Commission published a proposal covering issues like research potential, financial sustainability, governance and better partnerships between HE and business, noted as one of the areas which the Commission would like to see supported via the structural funds. The Commission is considering feasibility of a scoreboard exercise to measure progress in Member States.

16. Closely related to this work is the "Bologna process", which aims to promote employability and mobility across Europe, as well as increase the competitiveness of European higher education. The main aspects of "Bologna" include inter-governmental co-operation on comparable qualifications; flexible curricula which correspond to the needs of the labour market; and trustworthy quality assurance systems.

17. Bologna Seminar on graduate employability: The WAG is hosting a seminar on graduate employability at the University of Swansea in July, which will focus on how we ensure that higher education, particularly at the Bachelor level, is relevant to the labour market and that employers are

aware of the additional skills that a graduate can offer. Recommendations from Swansea should feed into the 2007 Ministerial conference in London, which follows on from that held in Bergen in 2005 which I attended. The University of Swansea is the "Bologna promoter" for Wales and is among the first universities in the UK to apply for "Bologna labels" for institutions that properly implement Bologna. It also successfully bid for an Erasmus Mundus joint degree in media studies.

18. European Institute of Technology : The European Commission proposes that a European Institute of Technology (EIT) be established, based on networks ("knowledge communities") rather than bricks and mortar with the aim of helping to fill the gaps between HE, research and innovation. Questions remain however about how it might work in practice. The University of Cardiff, in particular, has expressed interest in this initiative and has been canvassed for its views by Universities UK, the body representing vice-chancellors.

19. As part of the Four Motors grouping, I met with the Four Motors Ministers responsible for HE in Barcelona earlier this year where we agreed to revitalise linkages at Higher Education level. Finally, the Welsh higher education sector has recently opened an EU office in Brussels.

## **Multi-lingualism**

20. In its first policy statement on multilingualism, published last year, the Commission stressed the economic, social and cultural benefits of promoting language learning and linguistic diversity. It also recommended setting up a high-level group on multi-lingualism and a network of "language diversity centres". On behalf of EARLALL, the WAG wrote to key players in the EU Institutions urging it to invite experts on language planning from regional and minority language communities onto the high level group and for the "linguistic diversity centres" to focus on promoting and safeguarding regional and minority languages.

21. I reiterated the above points in my speech to a Brussels conference on "regional and minority languages in education systems" on 29 April which brought together some two hundred representatives from Europe's lesser used language speaking communities with the aims of exchanging best practice on issues like bi-lingual education. The Commissioner responsible, Jan Figel, emphasised his commitment to maintaining linguistic diversity and referred to the "excellent work" of the network of European language boards, headed by the Welsh Language Board. Wales was also represented by Prof. Colin Baker and Meirion Prys Jones of the Welsh language board.

## **Citizenship education**

22. In the context of the Committee's study on citizenship education in Wales, the following points may be relevant:

- European and global citizenship issues can be addressed in the Welsh Baccalaureate – most obviously in the Wales Europe and the World and Personal and Social Education components of the Core certificate.
- the Wales Europe and the World element will be extended to all learners aged between 14-19 from 2008

- Other opportunities in the National Curriculum occur in History and Geography Programmes and Personal and Social Education – both under review by the WAG
- Funky Dragon, the children and young people’s assembly for Wales, were heavily involved in the 2005 UK Presidency youth event and continue to raise their profile in Europe;
- Clic - the information and advice service for young people in Wales – has included a section ‘UK, Europe + the rest of the world’ on its website.
- The WAG promotes a series of policies and projects aimed at promoting the participation of young people in their local communities
- Welsh involvement in European programmes like Comenius to promote cultural and educational exchanges has traditionally been high (11% of UK total in 2004 for example)

### **Lifelong learning programme 2007-13**

23. The main European funding streams to promote education, training and lifelong learning over the next seven years will be the European Social Fund and the Integrated Lifelong learning programme. This section will focus on Welsh participation in the current EU spending programme in education and training and look forward to the new lifelong learning programme, worth EUR 6.2 billion.

24. In terms of Welsh participation in the sub-programmes to date, it has been good with projects from Wales making up 6.5% of the UK total in 2005. As noted above, it is particularly high as regards the Comenius school partnership programme where Welsh participation has been well above our population level – at 11% in 2005. As regards Erasmus and Grundtvig, latest figures suggest that both are slightly above the UK average. While Leonardo participation has traditionally been relatively low, I am pleased that figures for 2006 are to date higher with participation rates at 10% of the UK total.

25. We are however not satisfied that we are yet fully exploiting the benefits that these programmes can offer and we therefore aim to further improve take-up. We shall do this by seeking to ensure that the agencies which administer these programmes in the UK take better account of the different context, strategies and priorities applying to Wales and of our international links.

26. Turning to the composition of the prospective new European Lifelong Learning programme, the indicative allocation, yet to be formally agreed, is comprised as follows: Comenius (schools) 13%; Erasmus (higher education) 40%; Leonardo da Vinci (vocational training) 25% and Grundtvig (adult education) 4%. The remainder of the budget will be spent on supporting projects in ICT, language learning, policy development, the Jean Monnet university chairs and EU organisations in education. For the first time, the language element of this programme will be open to regional and minority languages, which should provide additional opportunities for Wales.

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