



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar
Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh
Irish Presidency of the Council
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23 January, 2013 - Minister of State Cannon's Presentation on Ireland's Presidency priorities in the area of education and training to the CULT Committee of the European Parliament

Introduction

At the outset, I wish to say that I welcome the chance to outline Ireland's Presidency priorities in the area of education and training to Culture and Education Committee of the European Parliament. As part of our preparations, my colleague Minister Quinn, whom I am representing here today, has had the opportunity to meet many of you already. This has been of great benefit to us and we look forward to further discussions with you during the course of the Irish Presidency.

For any EU Presidency to succeed, an effective 'win-win' relationship with the European Parliament has to be among the key goals. We are committed to forging such a relationship with the Parliament during our Presidency.

For many people in Europe, these are difficult times. My parents belonged to a generation who wanted their children to be better off than they were. And we are better off! We can no longer be sure, however, that the same will be true of our own children. As a result of the economic crisis, in many countries poverty is on the increase and unemployment-among young people in particular - has reached disastrous levels.

Ireland's core aim as Presidency therefore, across every Council formation, will be to seek ways of supporting sustainable jobs and growth in Europe and of restoring economic stability to the European economy. Education and training have a key role to play in this endeavour and in tackling and resolving the current unemployment crisis across Europe.

Quality and **equity** are the two broad themes of our Presidency in education and training and our priorities reflect these themes.

Intensive preparations on our Presidency programme and calendar of events have been underway for some time.

Primarily, we aim to reach agreement with the Parliament on the new EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. We also intend to focus on:

- A response to the Commission's 2013 Annual Growth Survey and Communication on Rethinking Education, including enhancing the role of education and training within the EU 2020 process;
- The social dimension of higher education;
- Teacher education, and;
- Qualifications.

New Integrated Programme in the area of education, training, youth and sport

A key objective of the Irish Presidency in the field of education and training will clearly be to reach agreement with the European Parliament on the proposal for a new integrated programme in the areas of education, training, youth and sport.

In May last year, EU education ministers agreed a partial general approach on the Commission proposal. Whilst maintaining the overall architecture of the draft regulation, ministers proposed - amongst other things - to ensure greater visibility for youth by including a separate chapter and budget allocation, to ensure minimum spending levels for each of the sectors represented in the programme and to provide for a more flexible approach to implementation, particularly at the level of the National Agencies.

Following the vote which took place in this Committee on 27 November last year, we now know the Parliament's views on the proposal. Accordingly, the Irish Presidency will shortly be seeking a mandate from Coreper to participate in negotiations with the European Parliament's rapporteur, Mrs Pack, and with representatives of the Commission, with a view to securing an agreement between our respective institutions on this important proposal at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, we have divergent views on some aspects of the proposal. However, it is also fair to say that there is considerable common ground between the views expressed in Parliament and in Council on this dossier. Given the climate of close cooperation and collaboration which successive Presidencies have enjoyed with the rapporteur and her team, I believe it is not unreasonable to think that - once the final budget for the programme is known - an overall agreement between us can be reached fairly rapidly.

If so, then preparations can begin in good time to enable the Programme to enter into force, as scheduled, on 1 January 2014. This would indeed mark a significant step forward. Given the popularity and success of the current Lifelong Learning, Youth in Action and other existing programmes, the importance and relevance of the Union's action in the fields of education, training and youth - particularly in these tough economic times - cannot be underestimated.

Rethinking Education

The current youth unemployment rate is close to 23% across the European Union – yet at the same time there are more than 2 million vacancies that cannot be filled. Early school leaving remains at unacceptably high levels in some Member States. Nearly 20% of 15-year-olds lack sufficient literacy skills, while around 25% of adults currently have a low level of education.

Europe needs a radical rethink on how education and training systems can deliver the skills and competences needed by the labour market. The challenge could hardly be tougher at a time of scarce resources and cutbacks in many countries.

As you will be aware colleagues, in response to this challenge, the European Commission published a comprehensive new communication on *Rethinking Education* in November, 2012. Complementary to this year's Annual Growth Survey, the Communication proposes a number of policy priorities for education and training systems over the coming years.

The Irish Presidency will be the first to respond to this important initiative. As a first step, the Presidency has drafted a set of Conclusions, currently being considered by the Education Committee in advance of adoption at

the February EYCS Council. The Conclusions set out a preliminary response not only to the new initiative but also to the messages contained in the Commission's 2013 Annual Growth Survey.

The challenge we face today is too great to be resolved by any one country or any one policy area, and we must all work together to find the right solutions. Education and training have a critically important role to play in achieving sustainable growth. Europe will only resume such growth by producing highly skilled and versatile people who can contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship.

Education & Training within the EU semester

Building on last year's Annual Growth Survey and on the Country-Specific Recommendations adopted in July, the 2013 Growth Survey shows that issues related to education and training are playing an increasingly important role within the EU 2020 strategy for growth and jobs.

The new Survey explicitly identifies education and training systems as key drivers for growth and competitiveness, alongside innovation and research & development. It underlines the key role of investments in human capital for tackling unemployment and preparing a job-rich recovery. It emphasises the importance of skills, education and lifelong learning to improving employability and, in particular, to tackling youth unemployment.

The specific priorities for education and training identified in the Annual Growth Survey are outlined in the "Rethinking Education" package referred to earlier. However, we believe the time is also ripe to reconsider how we organise and conduct cooperation at European level. In particular, how do we make best use of the work done via the Open Method of Coordination, so that it supports the efforts being made at national level in response to those priorities and that it produces tangible benefits for all concerned?

For this reason, and as an integral part of the Conclusions on the "Rethinking Education" package, we have put forward proposals aimed at establishing a closer link between the key strategic policy challenges identified during the European Semester and working group activities conducted under the Open Method of Coordination. This proposed

approach involves closer collaboration between the Education Committee and other committees such as the Economic Policy Committee and the Employment Committee

At the same time, we are seeking to improve the working methods currently used within the Open Method of Coordination in order to fully exploit the potential of cooperation and peer learning

The economic crisis has introduced a new sense of urgency and a need to ensure we are optimising the outcomes and efficiency of EU cooperation and policy development in the field of education and training. Just as we have had to scrutinise our domestic programmes, so also must we scrutinise the initiatives on which we work together at European level. The Irish Presidency is working to make a real contribution to this effort by including a number of very practical proposals to enhance working methods within the draft Council Conclusions on the "Rethinking Education" package.

The social dimension of higher education

We will also focus on the social dimension of education, in particular higher education. Due to the increasing demand for higher education in recent years and the shortage of resources, little attention has been paid to some notable disparities: available data show a significant socio-economic bias, namely that those students whose parents have a high level of education and resources have more opportunities than others to successfully finish their studies.

It is important to endeavour to secure more equitable access to higher education. There are still too many capable students who are excluded from higher education systems because of their socio-economic situation, insufficient systems of support and guidance, and other obstacles.

Knowledge and higher education are public assets and achieving greater equity in terms of access to, participation in, and the completion of higher studies is a public responsibility. Modern societies cannot allow themselves to neglect the talents and abilities of people with fewer material resources.

In line with the Europe 2020 agenda to step up the modernisation of higher education and achieve the EU headline target whereby 40% of 30-34 year olds should have completed tertiary or equivalent education by 2020, the Irish Presidency will propose a set of Council conclusions for adoption in May on the social dimension of higher education. Effective strategies to ensure access to higher education for non-traditional learners and students from disadvantaged backgrounds will form an important part of Member States' efforts to work towards the EU headline target.

We will hold a Presidency conference at the end of this month on the Rankings and the Visibility of Quality Outcomes. University rankings at global international level are a matter of importance. 4,000 of the world's 15,000 universities are located within Europe. Europe, therefore, needs to work to provide a better balance with the present array of ranking systems. The present EU University Multi-ranking Project is a priority for us.

Teacher Education

Fourthly, we plan to focus on the teaching profession, in particular on the role of the teacher educator. Teachers are widely acknowledged to be the most important determinant of school quality and educational success.

A core responsibility for any education and training system is to ensure that prospective teachers are properly selected and adequately prepared for the tasks they have to undertake. The education and training of teachers in preparation for, and indeed throughout, their careers is an essential element in ensuring high quality teaching and better learning outcomes.

Providing appropriate support for teacher education institutions and teacher educators is critical, if we are to develop innovative responses to the many challenges which teachers face today.

The issues relating to teacher education were last specifically addressed at European Council level in 2009, in the Council Conclusions of the Swedish Presidency on the professional development of teachers and school leaders, and again at the recent ministerial policy debate under the Cyprus Presidency on improving teacher quality and status at a time of scarce financial resources.

The Irish Presidency is prioritising this important subject and will propose a set of draft conclusions for adoption by ministers in May on improving policy support for the teacher educator profession.

These conclusions will examine areas such as how to strengthen the professional profile of the teacher educator profession, policies supporting the selection, induction and professional development of teacher educators and exchanges between policy makers on these issues.

As a prelude to the Conclusions, a conference on the role of the teacher educator will be held in Dublin in February.

Qualifications

Finally, we plan to focus on the area of Qualifications. We will be holding a Presidency conference this March, organised by our new integrated Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority, on the theme of quality assurance in qualifications' frameworks. Linked to the skills agenda, this conference will include a focus on the manner in which employment sector actors are engaged in quality assurance in relation to the needs of the labour market.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude today by thanking Mrs Pack and the members of the CULT committee for their co-operation to date.

I can assure you that the Irish Government intends to work pragmatically and constructively with all of our partners. We are committed to addressing the challenges, and to seizing the opportunities that the Presidency presents in achieving real and long-lasting deliverables for all of our citizens.

Thank you.