



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

EU High Level Group on the Modernisation
of Higher Education

13 February 2013

The Chairperson: We are trying to see whether we can fix that, Margie. Is that any better?

Ms Waters: It is quieter; let me put it that way.

The Chairperson: We are now removing the microphones from in front of our members, which is a really good plan anyway. Is that any better?

Ms Waters: Yes, that has certainly brought the noise down a little.

The Chairperson: If you are OK to start, Margie, go ahead.

Ms Waters: Thanks very much. I am guessing that individual members will let us know who they are when we get around to the questions. Maybe you can give us an indication of how much time we have together.

The Chairperson: I will get members to very quickly introduce themselves. We have about 30 minutes, so from now until 10.45 am, if that is adequate. Starting on my right, perhaps members could introduce themselves.

Mr Hilditch: David Hilditch.

Mr Ross: Alastair Ross.

The Chairperson: They are from the Democratic Unionist Party.

I am Basil McCrea, Ulster Unionist and Chair of the Committee.

Mr P Ramsey: Pat Ramsey, Social Democratic and Labour Party.

Mr F McCann: Fra McCann, Sinn Féin.

Ms McGahan: Bronwyn McGahan, Sinn Féin.

The Chairperson: There we go. That is the happy band that we have.

Ms Waters: Thank you. My mother is from Belfast, so if I start to sound like you, you will know why.

The Chairperson: I think it is part of your training that you have some sort of linguistic thing that comes in. We could talk to anybody.

Ms Waters: As you know, in 2011, the Commission published the modernisation agenda for higher education. That links very much to the Europe 2020 agenda, which is about getting the EU back on its feet so that we can put the crisis behind us and invest in innovation, sustainable growth and people in general. The higher education agenda is a response to all that. We know that the rest of the world is changing, just like Europe is changing. We see a need for new skills. For example, we predict that, by 2020, 35% of all jobs will need university qualifications. At the moment, only 26% of the EU workforce has those qualifications. So, we have a long way to go. Even in the crisis, there are high-skilled jobs that cannot be filled. So, there are opportunities for growth and creating more jobs that are not being picked up.

One element of Europe 2020 was to set an EU-wide target of 40% for higher education graduates. That is an EU target in general. Each country has set its own target. In the case of the UK as a whole, there is not an official target, but we know that the attainment level is around 43%. We would say that that is very much on target, but obviously there is room for a greater degree of those kinds of skills across all parts of the United Kingdom. What we see with that particular group is that higher education has changed so much in the past 10 years, including the people who are coming in, because countries are trying to make sure that they have much broader access than in the past. So you have people coming from all walks of life. You have got a change in how information is delivered and knowledge accessed. With the internet, anybody can get hold of any piece of information now. However, what do you do with it? How do you develop the critical thinking skills that allow you to make sense of it and use it properly?

We know that the older teaching model of the past, of large lecture halls and people taking down notes, must change and is changing. That means that how the teacher teaches is much more at the centre of things than it should be. Yet, we feel that research still gets most of the funding and attention, and that things that are accepted as normal in, for example, secondary education — that all teachers should have teaching skills — are not necessarily part of any higher education system. We did some research. We surveyed the 27 EU countries and found that some countries but not many have a national strategy. Some institutions but not many want to make teaching and learning quality the focus of what they do. So this group was set up for the purpose of trying to rebalance the picture and put teaching and learning more to the centre.

As you know, Mary McAleese agreed to chair the group, and with her she has seven others with various profiles from the EU, and we can go into that a little if you like. The group's purpose is to make recommendations to higher education institutions, Governments or regional authorities that deal with higher education and to the EU. We have spending programmes, such as ERASMUS, the structural fund and Horizon 2020 for research, and we want them to tell us how that money could be better put to use to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The first report will be out in June, and the group will then move on to another subject for next year — new forms of delivering higher education, which is linked very much to the information revolution.

I will stop my overview there for the moment. We are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: OK; thank you very much. What is the precise topic of the report due out in June?

Ms Waters: It is about improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

The Chairperson: OK. It strikes me that Ireland and the United Kingdom have relatively well developed higher education structures. Is your work focused on raising standards in accession states and other places with less well developed systems, or are there lessons for the UK and Ireland?

Ms Waters: We agree that these issues have been on the table for a while in the UK and Ireland. The Higher Education Academy in the UK looks at raising teachers' skills levels. The national strategy in the Republic of Ireland also has an approach to making teaching skills much more central to what is done in institutions. However, we are looking at the broad range of all countries and reckon they all have something to learn from each other or to pass on to each other.

The Chairperson: I am really asking how relevant the work that you will carry out is to the like of us, who have universities, teacher training colleges and suchlike that already have the issues at least on the table. Who will read the report that you produce and what effect will it have?

Ms Waters: We are going to set up, for example, ERASMUS for All, which will replace ERASMUS, the scheme that enables students to go to other parts of the EU for part of their studies. Within that, we are going to set up networks of institutions. So, we would expect the group to be saying that those networks should be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning so that they learn from each other. I reckon that the institutions in Northern Ireland could be very interested in those networks. We will be able to take what we hear from you today and feed it into the group. We will be able to pass on some learning in that way. We had a presentation from the Republic of Ireland's Higher Education Authority at the end of last year on what it is doing. We will also feed that into the group's recommendations.

The Chairperson: Just for the benefit of the Committee, I have prepared a few issues. If any members wish to raise issues, they should indicate that and I will bring them in.

Margie, am I right in saying that there has been increased funding for the ERASMUS programme in the new EU budget, and that we are trying to increase the numbers of people who are travelling? Am I am correct that ERASMUS is now a bigger project?

Ms Waters: Yes. As you know, there was agreement last week on the financial framework. The actual detail has yet to trickle down, but the figure for ERASMUS is an increase on what was in the 2007-2013 framework. We do not meet the demand we have for students to travel, and we also want to have more structured partnerships between institutions to allow them to produce better results for

themselves as a consequence of student and staff mobility. We will put a big accent on that in the next programme.

The Chairperson: That would be my observation on the ERASMUS programme. Although the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland use the programme extensively, I am not sure whether there is any coherency in the benefits that are gained. I am also not sure that people really understand how beneficial the entire European project to increase mobility might be. It might be a nice thing to do rather than a really significant way forward. I feel that to you as an issue that you might want to address. So —

Ms Waters: If I could just respond to that. We do satisfaction surveys with students. We are carrying out a long study on the benefits at the moment, and students are very clear on the benefits to themselves with the skills they acquire.

We would certainly like to be sure that every mobility period abroad is a quality mobility period. Sometimes there can be issues with recognising the credits that were earned and so on. We are going to make that a much more rigorous part of the issue.

The UK, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are not among the countries that take up the opportunity most, although they are very high among the countries that receive students. We would like to see greater numbers coming from this part of the world and taking part in ERASMUS. There is still room for more students to do that.

The Chairperson: Excellent. That will certainly be an issue that we will be interested in when you make your report.

Mr P Ramsey: Good morning to you in Brussels. I want to follow on from the Chair's comments about ERASMUS. Will you outline to us the process for a young person from Northern Ireland, for example, to participate in that programme? Is a database kept of, as you said, the benefits that students achieved or the opportunities for employment and related matters? Do you keep an ongoing database not just for students from Northern Ireland but across Europe? How many students do we regularly send to Europe on the ERASMUS project?

Ms Waters: OK. Thanks very much. Did you ask how about how students go on to ERASMUS, what the work opportunities are and what the numbers are?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes.

Ms Waters: I have to disappoint you on the last question, because I do not have a breakdown of the individual numbers, but I can send you those. That is very easily done.

Every university or college will have an international officer. Some students will be on courses for which an ERASMUS period is obligatory. For example, my son was in Queen's doing French and he spent a year in France teaching English, although the opportunity would be to be a student or to have a work placement. We are increasing the number of work placements, because we think that it does have a big impact on your employability skills. That is the area that we have particularly invested in since about 2009-2010. In every university or college that is part of ERASMUS — and 3,800 out of 4,000 in the EU are — we expect that there are already pretty well established structures in place in order to sign up and find the institution that you can partner with.

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. You talk about dismantling the barriers faced by women to reaching a postgraduate education. I speak as a postgraduate. At that point in time, I was the mother of a very young baby, and the whole area of childcare was vital. What consideration has been given to that particular area for women and mothers to pursue postgraduate education?

Ms Waters: Thanks for that question. I do not know whether you know the Marie Curie programme, which is a European programme for researchers. It has a high proportion of women in it, and that is partly because it allows particular criteria for women, for example, returning into the research workforce after being out on maternity leave or whatever. That difficulty in making an academic career is a big issue for women, so Marie Curie pays particular attention to that.

In general terms, we see that there are more young women going into higher education than young men, but when you get into the leadership structures or professorships, the pyramid is very much what we are used to seeing, with far more men than women in leadership positions. That brings us to an area where the EU can encourage, but it is not the EU that has the power to change what the member countries do in order to address that issue. That is an issue for national or regional Governments to address. We would be in support of an approach that takes account of the fact that you have women in the workforce and their childcare needs must be catered for.

Ms McGahan: You talk about dismantling the barriers, but I would have thought that that would have been one of the key areas for you, as opposed to leaving it to member states, because that is a key barrier. Surely that should be a priority.

The Chairperson: There is a bit of feedback, Bronwyn. She got the question.

Ms Waters: It is a key barrier, but we have an employment policy on getting women into work. There is an EU target on the number of women in work, but, again, we can encourage and support. For example, in ERASMUS, we have projects on how to overcome the gender barrier, so we look at good practice between universities, but the kind of good practice that we can uncover would need to be rolled out at a national or regional level.

Mr Allister: Good morning. I see that you are prominently displaying the European flag. You are not subject to designated days, then?

Ms Waters: The European flag —

The Chairperson: I am not sure that that joke travels, but anyway.

Mr Allister: I am sure that she understands.

Education, of course, is not an EU competence but a member state competence. So, anything that you do and say is in that context. Is that correct?

Ms Waters: Yes. According to the treaties, the EU has the role of supporting what member states do in education. That is how we see our role. We can get the countries together to share good practice, agree common targets and take steps to address those things. We have a supporting role.

Mr Allister: In that supporting role, you are enthusiastic about the mobility of students. Is that correct?

Ms Waters: Yes. That is another area where, of course, we can do something that cannot be done so easily by any one country on its own.

Mr Allister: Mobility of students is a good thing in itself. However, one of its spin-offs is that for countries and regions like this that already suffer from a brain drain, it accentuates that problem, does it not?

Ms Waters: I do not think that we would necessarily see eye to eye with you on that issue. Mobility allows students to go to another country, expose themselves to new cultural situations and develop skills like resilience, problem-solving and language skills — all things that are very useful in the labour market. If you are going to take a year out of your degree in another country, you will come back home to finish your degree. There is not necessarily an assumption that you will leave again. You may have brain circulation rather than brain drain.

Mr Allister: In Northern Ireland's case, we have practical experience of a very significant percentage of students leaving to study outside Northern Ireland and never returning, which, of course, they are perfectly entitled to do. However, a brain drain does not, in itself, make a helpful contribution to the indigenous economy. Does it?

Ms Waters: I guess that, in that instance, students decide where they would like to go for themselves. It is not really anything that the EU is influencing by offering the opportunity of mobility as part of study. I guess that that comes from a whole range of reasons that students might have. The building up of

the higher education system in any part of the union offers students a good choice and a good reason for staying at home.

Mr Allister: So, you have no concerns about brain drain and, therefore, no measures to address it. Is that right?

Ms Waters: Insofar as we are talking about the ERASMUS programme and the opportunity to study abroad, we do not see that as a brain drain. We would definitely encourage that programme.

Mr Allister: Thank you.

The Chairperson: I think you have established your point.

Just before I bring in Mr Hilditch, it is worth saying that I understand that there are Bologna process targets of, I think, 20% for mobility and such like. Following on from the questions there, it seems that there needs to be some reasoning as to why mobility is a good thing in itself, not just for individual students, and why we are seeking to strengthen institutions. That may come out when you talk about the teaching. That point needs to be borne in mind.

Mr Hilditch: Good morning. You invite member states to increase their efforts to minimise the higher education dropout rates. From your experience, where do you see the focus of those efforts being?

Ms Waters: The focus of those efforts pretty much needs to start even before people get into higher education. I think that you need to start with the school system in general to ensure that people make good choices when they go into higher education. We are looking at that issue in detail, and will be meeting people from different countries at the beginning of March to look at what is happening in different countries. You need support structures for students, and guidance. Some institutions have an approach whereby they identify vulnerable students at the beginning of their academic career, so as to be able to offer them particularly structured support throughout. You need a system that allows you to maybe take your exams a second time, if you have difficulty the first time. It is all about supporting the student and knowing who your students are. Some countries have quite in-depth knowledge of who is coming in, others maybe less so. We think that that is an important element, as well as, of course, taking measures to make your studies maybe more relevant to the job market or to what students are going to need afterwards. Therefore, students can see the value of what they are doing in relation to their broader life and as an incentive for continuing in study.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I would like to make a couple of specific points. Your next report is on improving the quality of teaching. We do feel that it is difficult for established teachers to keep up to date with IT developments. How do you propose to do continuous professional development in a market that is changing really quickly?

I will mention a number of other issues, just to put down that you can finish and we can conclude on these points.

I notice that the Commission will propose a single programme for education, training and youth. Might you tell us what that is? It does seem to focus spending on priorities such as quality and innovation in teaching. What is this single programme?

I notice in the brief the thoughts of the Commission on how we look at different forms of funding for educational establishments; that is to say that, although it will be public sector-led, we do need to look at private sector funding, so that we can do a higher quality of teaching. That is particularly relevant to us here in Northern Ireland, because we have a number of teacher-training colleges that are part of the higher education system and are only loosely connected with our universities. We need to understand whether it is the intention to build facilities, using European regional development funds, that are stand-alone centres of excellence. How would that move in?

Finally, I notice that the European Commission is starting to look outside the European area and develop relations on higher education with partners beyond the union. Presumably, that means the US, certainly in areas such as energy and that sort of thing. I wonder whether there are any plans to extend the co-operation outside the European Union.

Ms Waters: The single programme for education, training and youth brings together the education and training programme that existed until now, the lifelong learning programme and the programme for youth, which is called Youth in Action and concentrates on non-formal learning and areas of youth work, and which aims to provide mobility, discussion or debate opportunities for people who are not actually in the formal education system.

It is an attempt to streamline what we have already and to get better connections between what we do in formal education and what we do in non-formal education. As a single programme, it will also rationalise the different, quite small, programme areas that we have for co-operation with other parts of the world. It will be one single programme that includes non-formal education alongside the formal system and brings opportunities for co-operation with the rest of the world. That is also one reason why the funding is increasing: so that we can do better in all those areas.

In terms of the different forms of funding of higher education, we have commissioned a research study on different forms of cost-sharing in higher education. We will have some results of that out next year, and we will be happy to share those with you. They will be made public, but we will make a note of that.

On the question about using the regional development fund for stand-alone centres of excellence, it will be your priority to decide where you want to spend any funding that comes from the European Union. It is not the intention for the EU to say, "This is what you need to do." That will be a local decision about how the different institutions mesh together best.

The Chairperson: On that point, just briefly — the issue of funding higher education and training teachers and lecturers. The Commission talks repeatedly about setting up autonomous institutions that can specialise more easily. There seems to be a drive from the Commission on the need to look at different forms of funding. How will the European Union and Commission will encourage us as member states, or regional parts of that, to spend money on setting up autonomous privately funded or partly privately funded institutions? This would be an interesting change, certainly for us in Northern Ireland. You said that a report is coming out on it, and we will look at that with some interest. It would require us to change our attitude to the funding of our institutions. That is perhaps timely, but we would like to know more about it when the time is right.

Ms Waters: When we are talking about a panel of institutions, we are looking at the practices in 27 different member states. In Ireland and the UK, universities and colleges have a high degree of autonomy to make their own decisions. However, that does not mean that they are autonomous in the sense of being disconnected from public funds. It might just be a question of interpretation. It is actually about giving institutions a lot of power. In some countries, they do not have that power and are not in a position to make their own decisions. We are talking about autonomy in the sense of decision-making powers.

The Chairperson: I get that point. The last bit is just because this is the report that you will be bringing out in June: the promotion of excellence in teaching. Is that teaching in secondary schools? In other words, is it higher education institutions preparing teaching for secondary level, or is it about the quality of teaching and lectureship in the higher education institutions themselves?

Ms Waters: It is very much the second point. In fact, the initial intention was to have a group on excellence in teaching in higher education. At the first meeting of the group, it said that its focus would be on quality of teaching and learning. It is meant to encourage teaching and learning as a shared process. However, we are still talking within higher education, because how it is dealt with in different countries is so fragmented.

The Chairperson: We would be interested in seeing the report when it is published. We may be able to talk further about it at that stage. There are no other question from members, so I think that we are content. Frank, you got off luckily — we will ask you questions next time. Margie, thank you very much for your time and for engaging with us. It is always useful to get started on these things. We will hopefully be able to pick it up with you when we start to see the fruits of your research. Thank you very much indeed.

Mr Petrikowski: Thank you.

Ms Waters: Thank you. It has been very useful for us to get your feedback. We will definitely be in touch when the report is out. Thanks again.