



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

EU High Level Group on the Modernisation
of Higher Education

26 June 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Chris Lyttle
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Frank Petrikowski	EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education
Ms Margie Waters	EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education

The Chairperson: I welcome, via video link, Ms Margie Waters, the deputy head of the higher education policy unit for the modernisation of higher education, and Mr Frank Petrikowski, the policy officer on higher education and the Bologna process. Good morning, folks.

Ms Margie Waters (EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education): Hello. Thank you very much for having us back. We are very glad to be here.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Margie. We have your papers. Do you want to give us a brief introduction?

Ms Waters: Frank will do that.

Mr Frank Petrikowski (EU High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education): Thank you. As you know, on 18 June, there was an official press release on the report of the high-level group. We were quite happy with the press coverage across Europe, as it made it into newspapers in almost all countries, which does not often happen with education issues.

The group had a working procedure whereby several good examples in Europe, either at an institutional level or a member state level, presented their cases on how they — the institution or the member state — promote quality in teaching and learning. Using those good examples, the group identified 16 recommendations targeted towards higher education institutions, public authorities and the EU. We did not want the recommendations simply floating around in the text. We therefore included existing good practices in Europe so that anybody can see that the recommendations can be achieved by using those models.

Given that the higher education landscape and institutions in Europe are very diverse, the group was aware that it could not have a one-size-fits-all approach. That is why, no matter where people or governments are starting from, they can pick up on the examples.

We are now trying to make the report more public by sending it to all Education Ministers. We also plan to raise it as an agenda item at the next Council meeting of Education Ministers during the Lithuanian presidency. That will involve a short presentation on the report, followed by a discussion. We will send the report to the directors of all 4,000 higher education institutions. We hope that it will be read, but, of course, we cannot really control that.

So far, all the European organisations based here in Brussels — the European University Association, the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, which is for applied science universities, and the European Students' Union — have reacted very positively to the report.

Four recommendations are targeted towards the EU and the European Commission. We will, of course, see what we can do to help to implement those recommendations. Hopefully, the Council will agree on a new programme, which will be called ERASMUSplus. Using the instruments in the programme, we will see how we can support the recommendations, whether in the pillars of mobility, structural partnerships or policy support.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Frank. Is there anything that you will do to ensure the implementation of the recommendations across member states? Will you do any follow-up to find out whether any of the institutions have picked them up or whether member states have acknowledged the report?

Mr Petrikowski: We can only observe. We do not have any legal instruments to enforce the recommendations. There are big differences among member states about improving the quality of teaching and learning. Very few countries have structured pedagogical training for teachers in higher education.

One recommendation is that, by 2020, there should be compulsory pedagogical and didactical training for teaching staff in universities and higher education institutions. There will be changes in the landscape, which will be observable, so we will be able to detect them. We will see whether institutions will take up some of the recommendations about making teaching and learning better. We will offer support for structural partnerships and mobility and ask them to focus on the teaching and learning side of their institutions. We will see what is happening on the ground in institutions from the proposed projects.

The Chairperson: Your press release refers to next steps and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Do you have any operational experience of those or any partners already working with them?

Mr Petrikowski: One of the members of the group is from Microsoft, so he has a certain affinity with the new modes of the digital age. However, we need to focus on the specific issue and not try to cover all aspects of digital revolutions in higher education. As a preparatory step for the high-level group, we will need desk research, which will detect what is happening on a global scale with the new modes of delivery in higher education, including MOOCs, online courses and open educational resources. We will try to get the group a research paper on that.

At the same time, inside the European Commission, we are working on communication on opening up education, which is accompanied by many research papers and statistical working documents. That gives the group a good base for discussion.

Mr Allister: Good morning. Your press release is headed "EU high level group: train the professors to teach". Is that not a little condescending?

Ms Waters: The title is designed to attract attention.

Mr Allister: It certainly caught my attention.

Ms Waters: We want to ensure that people talk about the report. In many countries, as the report shows, no training is offered, and there is no connection between training and promotion or career. *[Inaudible.]* tends to follow the research side of an institution rather than the teaching side. However,

teaching really counts for students, especially undergraduates. It is really important to put the spotlight on giving teachers the support to teach, especially as so many universities and colleges are undergoing a lot of change. It is no longer a question of addressing a lecture hall of students with a set of notes. Much more engagement is needed not only with the subject matter but with the skills that students can develop. It is a very complex area, which is why we thought that it was worth putting the spotlight on that recommendation.

Mr Allister: As was said, neither the Commission nor the group has any authority to implement any of this. What would it cost the institutions to follow the report's 16 recommendations?

Ms Waters: When we were gathering evidence from different stakeholders and actors, we heard about the experience in the Republic of Ireland, where a national forum on teaching and learning has been put forward. That initiative succeeded other initiatives that had been developed in the area. There was less money in the public coffers, but, nonetheless, they had costed what they could do and costed the achievements under previous initiatives. They were quite confident that a national forum could be rolled out at not great cost. That is an example of an initiative that has been costed by a member state.

Mr Allister: Many of the recommendations read that higher education institutions should do this, that or something else. I would have thought that all that involves costs. Has anyone tried to cost that for the institutions? In this part of Europe, higher education institutions are finding their budgets pretty tight; I am sure that it is the same across Europe. It is all very well for someone to say that institutions should do this, that or the other, but if there are cost implications, they would like to know about them, and I would like to hear about them.

Mr Petrikowski: We did not make cost calculations on the recommendations. It is not about extra money; it is about priorities and organisational matters. There were a lot of examples in higher education institutions. The leadership of one institution said that teaching is very important and that it is put at the centre of their ambitions. They created a teaching hub for all teaching staff in the institution, and that was a priority. It did not entail extra costs but was a priority in the existing budget.

Mr Allister: Are all the recommendations cost neutral?

Mr Petrikowski: I am a banker by training, but that is up to the institution.

Mr Allister: Do the recommendations seem to be cost neutral to you, or has no one thought about that?

Ms Waters: I will add to that. ERASMUSplus — the new education and training programme — will run for the next seven years. Funding will be available to institutions if they want to develop some of those initiatives in co-operation with other institutions in the strategic partnerships. They can fund staff mobility, for example, which we view as supporting ways to improve teaching skills, by developing new curricula or working together on teacher training. There is also a recommendation that member states consider using structural fund money to support these initiatives.

Mr Allister: That suggests that the initiatives will cost money.

Ms Waters: A country or an institution makes that choice. In so far as European money is available, the group identifies using it to support its recommendations.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you for your presentation. The report contains comments from the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism, Youth and Sport that not enough emphasis is being placed on teaching. The chair of the high-level group, Mary McAleese, is quoted as saying that teaching and learning have been overlooked on some occasions. How big a problem is that?

Mr Petrikowski: It depends on the country or the institution that you are looking at. These are general remarks that are true about hiring and promoting academic staff in higher education institutions and their payment. Research — not teaching and learning — is the main criterion.

Mr Lyttle: The report also states that there are excellent examples across Europe of teaching and learning being taken seriously. Are there particular countries where best practice is most evident?

Mr Petrikowski: From the European Commission side, we do not like to discriminate, but I must say that the Anglo-Saxon world is much further advanced than, say, the southern rim and the eastern part of Europe. England, Ireland and Scotland are very far advanced compared with many countries in the European Union.

The Chairperson: Margie and Frank, thank you very much for your time and your presentation this morning.