

Adult Education in Ireland: The implications of developments at European Union level

HELEN KEOGH

Any consideration of recent and proposed developments in education and training at European Union (EU) level points, in a word, to *Lisbon*. *Lisbon*, as in the *Lisbon Agenda*, is the destination, the compass and the journey driving developments in education and training systems in the EU member states. This paper sketches some of these developments and sets out their implications for adult education stakeholders in Ireland from now until 2010. *Adult education* is understood as publicly-funded provision for adult learning in statutory and other agencies, outside of the statutory training sector. Adult education *stakeholders* are understood to include policy makers, practitioners, participants, theorists and commentators.

Developments in Adult Education in Ireland pre – 2000 – The Role of the European Social Fund (ESF)

Up to the year 2000, statutory sector adult education stakeholders' main experience of the EU was as a funder, through the European Social Fund (ESF), of programmes such as Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training Centres, VTOS and PLCs. The benefits arising included responses to local individual and collective learning needs; a blurring of boundaries between education and training; certification opportunities; progression opportunities; staffing of services and in-career development opportunities.

But the way the ESF operated (O'Connor 1998) also brought opportunity costs for adult education. Most notable is the resultant programme rather than service infrastructure, giving rise to a compartmentalised 'egg carton' model of provision (Keogh, 2003). Limited integration across the various stand-alone programmes results in limited pooling of resources, limited staff mobility,

reduced flexibility, and, most critically, possible restrictions on learner progression within and beyond existing provision. In addition, the relative lack of emphasis on support services within ESF meant that adult educational guidance was not addressed until the publication of the White Paper on adult education in 2000.

Developments at EU Level post – 2000 – Implications for Adult Education in Ireland

By 2000, adult education provision in Ireland funded by the Department of Education and Science could be said to have been the result of what, in an associated context, O'Connor (1998) termed 'the interaction of basically unrelated events, rather than . . . some overall plan'. The *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (Government of Ireland 2000) provided a framework for expanding provision for 'those most at risk' and since 2000 ESF support has been key to the implementation of the strategy set out in the White Paper.

Early in 2000, at EU level, the heads of state and government, meeting in Lisbon within the European Council, had set the goal that by 2010 the EU should become '*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world ... with more and better jobs and ... greater social cohesion*'. The Lisbon goals covered research, education, training, Internet access, ebusiness and reform of Europe's social protection systems. Access to lifelong learning was recognised as having a vital role in the achievement of the Lisbon goals.

Since 2000, these top-level policy guidelines have given rise to a structured set of initiatives designed to improve quality and strengthen co-operation in education and training across the EU. Two specific policy initiatives merit mention, the concrete objectives initiative and the lifelong learning initiative.

Concrete Objectives of Education and Training Systems

The Lisbon European Council called for reflection on the concrete objectives of education systems, focusing on common concerns while respecting national diversity. It also defined a new approach to political co-ordination: the 'open method of co-ordination' (OMC) which would draw on tools such as indicators and benchmarks as well as on comparison of best practice, monitoring, evaluation and peer review.

In March 2001 the Stockholm European Council approved the *Report on the concrete future objectives of education systems* which set out a coherent overall approach to national education policies in the context of the EU, on the basis of three major objectives:

- improving the quality of education and training systems
- making lifelong learning more accessible to everyone
- making education and training systems more outward-looking as regards the rest of the world.

The report was the first official document sketching a comprehensive and coherent European approach to national education and training policies in the EU and was a major breakthrough for educational co-operation in Europe.

The subsequent work programme *Education and Training 2010* adopted in February 2002 by the Barcelona European Council defined a set of thirteen objectives and over 40 more detailed sub-objectives within a framework of lifelong learning. The work programme proposed the ‘open method of co-ordination’ defined in Lisbon to foster and measure progress. Education and training were recognised as a *key priority domain* in the overall Lisbon Agenda.

The interim report on progress towards the Lisbon goals, *Education and Training 2010: the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms* was submitted to the European Council in Brussels in March 2004. The report adopts an hortatory stance in urging that three priority areas be worked on, ‘*simultaneously and without delay*’. More effective and efficient investment in human resource development is urgently required; lifelong learning must become a concrete reality; a Europe of education and training must be established, including a European qualifications framework.

Adult education stakeholders in Ireland, especially providers at all levels, will welcome the call for enhanced investment in adult learning. However, investment will need to be monitored to ensure a balance between investment in human resource development and human potential development. The fact that from now until 2010 there will be a report every two years on progress in the implementation of Education and Training 2010 will assist that monitoring process.

Lifelong Learning; a New Strategic Vision for Education and Training

The second specific policy initiative adopted by the European Commission to support the Lisbon Agenda was that of lifelong learning. In the European Commission's *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (MLLL, November 2000) lifelong learning was presented as a vision, a conceptual framework for thinking about education and training and a guiding principle for provision and participation across all learning contexts.

On the basis of a Europe-wide consultation on the MLLL, the Commission adopted the *Communication, making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, in November 2001. The *Communication* defined lifelong learning as 'any learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'. The comprehensiveness of this definition was welcomed by adult educators in Ireland and throughout Europe. The *Communication's* emphasis on adult learning for active citizenship was considered significant in the context of an increasing Europe-wide focus, in practice, on adult learning for economic goals. This is of particular relevance for adult educators in Ireland given the growing ethnic and cultural diversity of society.

But the concept of lifelong learning also presents challenges to adult education stakeholders in Ireland. It places a focus on the individual and on learning rather than on systems, institutions, teaching and assessment. It acknowledges and values learning from a multiplicity of learning sites – formal, non-formal and informal – and it challenges the traditional boundaries between education and training. It raises important questions about 'ownership' of knowledge, financing of learning, the quantity and quality of learning, learner supports and the changing roles of policy-makers, providers and accrediting bodies.

The key message in the *Communication* about the importance of a *partnership approach* as the first building block in a coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategy has implications for policy-makers and practitioners alike in Ireland. Partnerships will support co-operation by relevant actors for coherence of responses to learning needs; co-financing of learning opportunities; diverse outcomes and recognition of learning from multiple settings.

In June 2002, on foot of an Education Council resolution confirming that lifelong learning should become the guiding principle for the development of

education and training policy in Europe, the Commission decided to locate future work on lifelong learning policy in the framework of achieving the concrete objectives of education and training systems.

However, a recent internal Commission review points to limited integration of a broad concept of lifelong learning into the objectives process. Adult education and learning are 'rarely present in an explicit way' in policy documents and reports of the objectives working groups. Only four of the eight working groups have addressed adult education and learning explicitly and many members of the groups have professional backgrounds in schooling or higher education rather than adult education. This is a worrying trend for adult educators. It appears to indicate that education and training are seen in terms of school and higher education provision within the objectives process and may point to misconceptions among the groups about the nature of, and need for, planned publicly-funded adult education for social inclusion through learning. It also points to a limited interpretation of the concept lifelong learning set out in the Commission's own *Memorandum* (2000) and *Communication* (2001) which saw learning as a cradle to grave activity (Grundtvig Working Group, 2004). Furthermore, it underscores the need for adult education stakeholders, especially national policy-makers, to ensure that working group representatives from the member states are fully briefed on adult education issues.

In this context, it may be useful to recall that, in addition to the work of the EU Directorate-General for Education and Culture, education and training – and lifelong learning as a structuring policy strategy – are a key dimension of a broad variety of EU and national policies, including employment; information society; youth; active citizenship; R&D; environment, consumer affairs and social policy. This broader policy and practice landscape supports adult educators in Ireland in pressing the case for lifewide and life-related as well as lifelong learning.

In 2003 the Education Council, in the context of the objectives of education and training systems, adopted five benchmarks or 'reference levels of European average performance' for the improvement of education and training systems in the member states. The following are of particular interest to adult education stakeholders:

- by 2010 at least 80% of 22 year olds will have completed upper secondary education in the EU

- by 2010 EU average participation in lifelong learning by the 25-64 age group will be at least 12.5%.

With regard to benchmarks and indicators, it is important for adult education stakeholders to recognise that they are 'here to stay' and that they will shape the quantity and quality of adult education from now until 2010. In view of the fact that what is measured is what is valued - and funded! - a critical issue for adult educators in Ireland and elsewhere is to ensure that measurement of education and training participation and outcomes at member state and EU level is based on a broad concept of lifelong and lifewide learning.

New Generation of Community Action Programmes

Throughout 2003 adult education policy-makers and practitioners in Ireland had an opportunity of participating in the consultation on the shape of the next generation of Community Action programmes. In March 2004 the Commission unveiled its proposal for an *Integrated Programme in Lifelong Learning 2007-2013*. An integrated programme with four sectoral programmes, including the new stand-alone Grundtvig programme for adult education, is proposed. In keeping with an overall thrust towards cohesion and integration and in a bid to enhance its effectiveness and impact, the overall integrated programme will reflect the goals of the Lisbon Agenda and will provide test-beds for the recommendations of the objectives' working groups. Under the Grundtvig programme it is proposed that at least 50,000 adults, including adult education providers, staff and learners, will benefit from education or training abroad each year by 2013.

The establishment of a distinct sectoral programme for general and civic adult had strong support from key personnel within the Commission and the resulting Grundtvig programme has been widely welcomed. The challenge for adult education stakeholders in Ireland will be to increase the level of participation by Irish partners in the proposed programme and to harness the learning arising from transnational co-operation and mobility to enhance adult education policy-making and provision in Ireland.

March 2004 also saw the launch of *Citizenship in Action*, which will also run from 2007. The proposed programme will enable civil society, faith-based, youth and cultural organisations, trade unions and family associations to draw down funding for activities that will contribute to the development of active

and participatory citizenship. This programme will have particular significance for community-based learning groups and organisations in Ireland and will support learning for interculturalism and civic participation as proposed in the White Paper on adult education.

Irish EU Presidency

The first half of 2004 was of special interest to adult education stakeholders in Ireland. The achievement of the Lisbon goals was a central theme of Ireland's EU Presidency. In May 2004 the first Education Council meeting in an enlarged Europe adopted a Resolution recognising the importance of guidance activities in the context of lifelong learning. This development should strengthen the calls in Ireland for an expansion of the adult educational guidance provision and for a transition from a project to a service infrastructure to enable integration of guidance into local adult education services. Political agreement was also achieved at the Council on the Europass proposal to improve the transparency and mutual recognition of qualifications. Europass will support the mobility of adult learners, within, to and from Ireland and will support the work of accreditation and qualifications bodies in Ireland. In addition, common European principles for the identification and validation of informal and non-formal learning were adopted by the Council. These principles and emerging follow-on strategies will play a major role in valuing adult learning achieved in diverse learning locations in Ireland.

Conclusion

While at first glance much of what has happened in terms of policy initiatives on education and training at EU and member state levels since 2000 might appear disjointed and unfocused, there are nevertheless clear underlying principles and strategies. A key advance has been the development of the first coherent overarching strategy for education systems within the collective goals set by the Lisbon Agenda and consolidated by the integrated objectives and lifelong learning process.

At EU policy level, the *Education and Training 2010* work programme is driven by the representatives of the member states on the objectives' working groups, at the meetings of Directors-General of Vocational Training and Directors-General of Adult Education and at the meetings of the Education Committee and the Education Council. At national policy level, a key challenge for policy-makers is to produce comprehensive strategies leading to operational policies,

programmes and initiatives to go beyond rhetoric and put the objectives process into practice. In adult education, securing funding to support these strategies and putting robust monitoring and evaluation in place to measure effectiveness will be key tasks to 2010.

At practice level, adult education stakeholders in Ireland have the twin challenges of influencing policy development and implementing the resultant policies. Despite the frequent perception of a 'democratic deficit' within the EU, adult educators on the ground can impact on policy at EU level through influencing national policy-makers who participate in the numerous EU fora on which the member states are represented. In addition, the national agencies managing the Community Action programmes in Ireland constantly seek feedback from adult education practitioners and policy-makers. A less direct channel of influence lies through communication with Irish MEPs, especially those who sit on the Education Committee.

At the level of practice, adult education stakeholders are, whether they are aware of it or not, already implementing key aspects of the Lisbon Agenda when they: provide lifelong, lifewide and life-related learning opportunities; strive to increase the quantity and quality of adult learning through learner-centred and flexible learning opportunities; provide certification opportunities; seek to integrate the adult guidance projects into the adult education service; seek to quality assure provision; participate in the development of learning regions through the R3L initiative or the strategies of the county or city development boards; engage in a Grundtvig action.

As *Education and Training 2010* is implemented over the next six years to 2010 adult educators can expect to see: an on-going need to press the case for a publicly-funded professional adult education service in the interests of equal opportunities, social inclusion and social cohesion; a more integrated adult education service supported by global funding at local level; a paradigm shift from supply-led to demand-driven learning opportunities and from provider-centred to learner-centred provision, including a bigger role for ICTs; greater emphasis on meeting the learning needs of multicultural populations in an intercultural Ireland; stronger partnerships to support adult learning, including closer co-operation between government departments and increased stakeholder co-financing of learning; seamless opportunities for learning and recognition of that learning within a national framework of qualifications;

emphasis on the quantity of learning being matched by an equal emphasis on the quality of learning within FETAC and other quality frameworks; developing information systems incorporating indicators and benchmarks for accountability, efficiency and effectiveness; pre-service and continuing professional development for adult education personnel to support the emerging transition from an 'heroic' to a professional model of adult education. Clearly, Lisbon set in motion a challenging agenda . . .

Helen Keogh is National Co-Ordinator of VTOS and is a regular contributor to debate on adult education at National and European level.

References

- European Commission, (2002). *Education and training in Europe: diverse systems, shared goals for 2010*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission, (2003). *Education and training 2010: the achievement of the Lisbon goals hinges on urgent reforms*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Government of Ireland, (2000). *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Grundtvig Working Group, (2004). *Education and training 2010: Inclusion of adult education and learning* - Unpublished report presented to the Grundtvig Working Group on 22 April 2004, Brussels: Directorate General for Education and Culture.
- Keogh, H. (2003). *Adult Learning Policies under the Department of Education and Science – Towards the Co-ordinated Provision of Adult Learning Opportunities in Ireland 2000-2002* IN: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport *NETA: What are we doing in Adult Education?* Madrid: Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport.
- O'Connor, T. (1998). *The Impact of the European Social Fund on the Development of Initial Vocational Education and Training in Ireland* IN: A. Trant, D. Ó Donnabháin, D. Lawton & T. O'Connor *The future of the Curriculum*. Dublin: CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit.