

European Commission Stakeholder Consultation on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications

Department for Employment and Learning – Position Paper

Introduction

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is one of twelve Government Departments in Northern Ireland.

The aim of DEL is to promote learning and skills, to prepare people for work and to support the economy. Its main unifying purpose is to improve access to skills and employment through education and training and work placements and to promote learning for social and personal development. This is designed to help raise productivity, and to play our part in increasing employment and creating an inclusive society by assisting individuals to access and retain sustainable employment, better wages and greater personal fulfilment.

The work of the Department is right at the centre of the Government's wider economic, social and lifelong learning policies, assisting economic growth on the one hand and social inclusion on the other.

DEL welcomes the opportunity to provide its views on the European Commission's consultation on the current obstacles faced by Europeans with regard to the transparency and recognition of their skills and qualifications when moving within and between EU Member States; on the adequacy of the related European policies and instruments; and on the potential benefits of developing a European Area of Skills and Qualifications.

By way of context, DEL, in conjunction with the other UK nations, is actively supporting and promoting better cross-border educational and labour mobility through the implementation of the main EU initiatives in the field of vocational education and training, most notably the EQF, ECVET, EQAVET and ESCO.

The implementation of these initiatives at a UK level is coordinated by the UK EU Coordination Group for VET of which DEL is a member. DEL has also convened an NI EU Coordination Group, comprising of a range of key stakeholders, to coordinate this activity in Northern Ireland.

In respect of the seven key themes of the consultation, DEL's main views can be summarised as follows:

1. How to place a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills

- Whilst DEL acknowledges the importance of placing a stronger focus on higher and more relevant skills throughout the EU, it would question whether European recognition and transparency instruments are appropriate vehicles for achieving this aim.
- As stated in the consultation document, curriculum design falls strictly under the competence of Member States. DEL would be of the view that Member States are best placed to develop and implement their own national policies to meet their individual industry needs and to address identified skills gaps. Currently a number of such strategies are being implemented in Northern Ireland, including DEL's Essential Skills Strategy and the NI Skills Strategy – "Success Through Skills: Transforming Futures".
- As one of the overriding principles for developing a European Area of Skills and Qualifications is to simplify and increase the coherence of the various existing EU transparency tools, DEL would also question the value of developing multiple new competence frameworks which would not necessarily support the above objective.

2. Further strengthening links between education/training, mobility and the labour market

- DEL is mindful of the fact that initiatives such as the EQF and ESCO are still in the early stages of implementation so do not necessarily require the development of new features at this time.
- It is important that we allow sufficient time for all of the EU initiatives to properly embed because, once fully implemented, they should help to strengthen the links between education/training, mobility and the labour market. ESCO is a prime example in this respect as it is in the very early stages of implementation and will not be fully operational until 2017.
- The development of effective communication strategies about the various initiatives onto relevant stakeholders is also critical for their successful implementation.

3. Adapting to internationalisation trends

- Before we can fully explore the possibility of using the EQF to promote the mutual recognition of qualifications, credits or learning outcomes between the EU and third countries, DEL believes that the current priorities should be ensuring that those Member States who have not already done so, complete the referencing process as soon as practically possible, and allowing the EQF time to fully embed within the EU.
- That said, DEL would support, in principle, exploratory work into referencing the NQFs of interested third countries to the EQF provided that robust quality assurance processes are put in place to ensure that the integrity of the EQF is maintained. It is recognised that this work is likely to present significant implementation challenges; however, if successful, it would go a long way to facilitating the mobility of learners and workers in the EU and beyond by allowing them to benefit from a clear understanding of the qualification levels of all countries officially referenced to the EQF.

4. Ensuring overall coherence of tools and policies and further implementing the learning outcomes approach

- DEL acknowledges that each of the tools add value in their own ways; however, steps can and should be taken to simplify and improve coherence of the various tools in order to maximise their effectiveness. For example, the European systems for credit transfer and accumulation – ECVET and ECTS are coherent in their principles but are not yet aligned fully in their practical implementation nor in their definitions of learning outcomes. More could also be done to increase the coherence between the Directive on the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications and the EQF – the development of common training frameworks linked to EQF levels which is being implemented through the revised Directive may go some way to achieving this.
- Simplification is critical. There are too many separate portals for the various instruments. Ideally these should be brought together in one location in order to facilitate ease of access.
- DEL is mindful of the fact that all of the EU transparency and recognition tools are still in the early stages of implementation so it is important to allow them sufficient time to fully embed in order to fully realise their benefits.
- At a national level, it is important for the different bodies/organisations working on the different tools to work closely together to establish where the tools overlap and how they could be implemented together to ensure coherence and maximise their effectiveness.

5. Ensuring clarity of rules and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning

- DEL would have reservations about the development of European criteria and procedures for the recognition of skills and qualifications for further learning. Such criteria and procedures would be extremely difficult to develop and

implement. DEL is of the view that procedures and decisions on recognition in the areas of VET and adult education should be left to Member States.

6. Increasing the focus on quality assurance

- DEL is of the view that the common basic principles and guidance for quality assurance should follow the current quality assurance principles. These principles include quality assurance of curriculum, teaching and learning, standards achieved and assessments. These are incorporated in a cyclical format through planning, implementation, evaluation and review.

7. Providing learners and workers with a single access point to obtain information and services supporting a European area of skills and qualifications

- DEL is of the view that currently too many portals and websites exist in relation to the various recognition and transparency tools, which only serves to cause confusion for learners and workers wishing to study or work in the EU.
- DEL would therefore very much welcome and support the development of single access points in each of the Member States to gather together the several existing and complementary tools into one single online service.
- DEL would envisage that the one-stop shop would enable learners and workers to access the information they are specifically seeking - whether that be information on Europass, EQF, credit transfer systems, opportunities to study abroad etc. DEL would recommend the development of an overarching “brand” for the one stop shop which could be adopted in a communications and marketing strategy to promote the service.
- The development of such a service would very much support the objectives of increasing the coherence of the various EU recognition and transparency tools and developing a European Area of Skills and Qualifications. However the cost to implement such a service is likely to be high so consideration would

need to be given as to how and by whom this would be funded i.e. would the EU provide funding or would Member States be required to contribute?

In conclusion, DEL trusts that its views will be taken into consideration by the European Commission and looks forward to the publication of a summary of the responses to the public consultation in due course.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Daryl Young', written in a cursive style.

DARYL YOUNG

**Deputy Director
Further Education**