



CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE “EU 2020” STRATEGY

RESPONSE FROM THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF REGIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING (EARLALL)

EARLALL

The Association was established in 2001 under Belgian law, and includes the co-operation of 23 European regional and local authorities with competencies in the field of lifelong learning as members, plus some 10 observer organisations, representing over 61 million people from across the north, south, east and west of Europe. It is a non-profit Association managed by a General Assembly and steered by a Board comprised of regional government education Ministers. Its role is to promote trans-regional cooperation, educational mobility, transfer of good practice, innovation and research for regional development and to support e-learning as a tool for lifelong learning. It does this through a high degree of collaboration among members and through close cooperation with the European Union (EU) and other public institutions throughout Europe.

EARLALL Member Governments have their own democratic mandates, policies and law making powers, albeit at varying degrees depending on the political structure within respective Member States. Many have competence for functions that affect people's daily lives such as health, economic development, social care, agriculture, rural affairs and, of course, education. They are, therefore, responsible for developing and implementing policy in their areas. EARLALL member governments make a significant contribution to the EU, and benefit greatly through trade and participation in EU programmes. Relations between the Associations' members and the EU are conducted through co-operation with respective Member State Governments, directly with EU institutions, and through participation in EARLALL. Interestingly, some EARLALL member government Ministers and officials can and do participate as part of their Member State delegations at relevant EU Council meetings and in other EU forums.

OPINION

The European Commission's Consultation on the future EU2020 Strategy is calling for a knowledge-based, connected, ecological and more inclusive economy, growing fast and sustainably, creating high levels of employment and social progress. The Association fully supports these overarching goals and EARLALL member governments are strongly encouraged by the degree of alignment between the key messages in the EU2020 consultation, and those already being developed and implemented at the Member State, regional and local authority levels.

While there is much to welcome and support in the EU2020 consultation the Association is, however, very disappointed that the EC's Consultation largely ignores the regional and sub-Member State dimension in economic and educational policy making. While EARLALL strongly supports the work of the EC in seeking to engage with Member States on this important agenda, the Association nevertheless considers it would be a serious strategic error if similar engagement is not also sought at the level of regional government throughout the EU. Given the pattern of governmental competency in the EU, in the long term any strategy for economic and educational development that is not also firmly rooted among regions would limit the potential for success. A successful approach to 'EU 2020' should be based on partnership from the bottom up, with localities, regions and member states all working together for common benefit.

'EU2020' calls for "increased policy co-ordination, better synergies through effective subsidiarity, and strengthened partnership between the EU and Member States in the design and delivery of public policies". The Association supports this general approach but considers that with policy making and implementation often taking place below the Member State level, it is essential to engage regional and local governments at the initial stages of policy formation. EARLALL is aware that some of its member regional Governments have already raised these issues bilaterally with the Commission in the context of this Consultation.

It is the view of EARLALL that any strategy should seek to improve the lives of people within the EU in real terms, and be more than the communication of shared values or principles. It should have regard to the current economic situation, but be primarily forward looking and long-term in focus.

PROPOSED PRIORITIES FOR "EU2020"

As an overarching framework EU 2020 should continue to support the three pillars of the current Lisbon Strategy; social, economic and environmental. Continuation of these key elements would ensure that future skills training and business growth meet the challenges of climate change and energy consumption.

1. Creating sustained value by basing growth on knowledge

EARLALL welcomes the emphasis on education and skills development, which both promote growth and employment, and are effective in fighting poverty and inequality.

Our member governments believe that the EU Budget in the next financial period (post-2013) should emphasise education and skills as a priority.

Education also represents an important vehicle for moving towards a more ecological economy. It is only by providing sustainable development education and green or ecological skills that we will be able to make the necessary transition to a low-carbon economy and society. Skills and training directly establish the basis for wealth creation. Science, innovation and technology help create the kind of growth that can make Europe competitive in the years ahead. EARLALL agrees that the European economy should be better supported by strengthened and systematic knowledge exploitation, as this is a key element to wealth creation and business growth.

Action to sharpen the effectiveness of research is matched by the need for higher education to enhance its impact on economic performance. This should be achieved directly through the investment universities and other research institutions are able to attract and, indirectly, through the stimulus they provide for innovation, business start-up and economic development. A crucial component of this is securing a research base capable of delivering relevant research, knowledge transfer and exploitation of intellectual property.

2. *Empowering people in inclusive societies*

EARLALL welcomes the emphasis on ensuring social cohesion and opportunities for all. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is the goal of our Member Governments that more people benefit from higher education, lifelong learning and vocational training. Vocational education and training (VET) is strengthened through partnership between employers and educational providers over the shaping and delivery of programmes. Our members are interested in exploring and piloting flexible programmes which enable progression to higher levels of learning, and which utilise the strengths of current VET systems, and flexibility in pace and timing. By opening up much more diverse ways to learn, benefits will be delivered in both a social justice and economic context.

EARLALL member governments have and continue to take a leadership role over recent years on the development of innovative VET mobility actions, as recognised in the recent Commission Green Paper on Youth Mobility. We see this as an example of how regions are able to define and manage resources for improved service delivery.

3. *Creating a competitive, connected and greener or more ecological economy*

Some of EARLALL's Member Governments have commented that the consultation places insufficient emphasis on the importance of concerted action on Climate Change. Within the Consultation there is reference to achieving climate goals. However, there is no reference to the EU's ambitious commitments for emission reduction, renewable energy or energy efficiency which could usefully be better reflected in the EU2020 strategy.

Universities should be recognised as leaders and key partners in their fields of research, particularly but not exclusively, where they concern science, technology,

engineering and mathematics, with benefits for the international profile of local areas and for businesses. Indeed, it is our shared view that small and medium sized enterprises should be well reflected given their critical role for economic development, employment and innovation.

Research should also make a valuable contribution to the wider world and to our society as a whole, as public services benefit from the intellectual stimulus and leadership in thought available, and as answers to global issues such as environment and climate change are sought.

Making it happen...’ – Supporting growth through a Stability and Growth Pact

EARLALL expects that ‘EU 2020’ will guide Europe towards growth and prosperity as we continue our economic recovery. Communicating clearly the policy agenda for the EU during the next 10 years, the EU2020 strategy needs to be underpinned by focussed financial support through Structural Funds and Lifelong Learning programmes.

The reduction of administrative burdens on EU supported programmes should be a priority – as should allowing regional governments the flexibility to shape delivery to specific local needs. Essentially, EARLALL recognises that the delivery of ‘EU 2020’ will be crucial, and we believe it should draw on best practice from existing structures where these have worked most effectively, and for which there are many examples of engagement at the regional level.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EU 2020

Although perhaps understandably, it was noted that the Consultation does not contain much detail on suggested indicators and targets to measure the overall objectives of the Strategy. One of the major criticisms of the Lisbon Strategy was its relatively low-profile. The rectification of this in the context of ‘EU2020’ will necessarily require greater investment of political capital at the sub-Member State level. On behalf of its Member Governments EARLALL asks, therefore, for the greater explicit involvement of regional and local governments in the development of this strategy, including in the process of agreement of indicators and targets.

CONCLUSION

EARLALL has consistently communicated its support for the European Union’s emphasis on sustainable growth and jobs. This approach reflects the economic development and educational policies of many of our Member Governments. EARLALL welcomes the next phase of this approach at EU level and the overarching goals set out in the EU2020 Consultation. However, EARLALL places a strong call on the EC for greater explicit partnership with regional and local governments. The Association believes that only through mobilising the efforts of the EU as a whole, not only at Member State level, can these ambitions be realised.

January 2010