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**Peer Learning Activity on Key Competences for
lifelong learning: Flanders - 29, 30 and 31
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Flanders Peer Learning Activity (“PLA”) took place over 3 days in January 2007 and involved representatives from eight countries participating the Education and Training 2010 work programme (AT, BE (nl), CY, ES, GR, HR, HU, LT, LU).

This note is designed to provide PLA participants and members of the EU-level Cluster Group on Key Competences with a summary overview of the discussions and to set out emerging policy issues raised during the PLA that will need to be discussed in further detail in subsequent PLAs. Examples of effective practices discussed or presented as part of the PLA are set out wherever these are policy-relevant.

The Flanders PLA focused on ‘Learning to Learn’, which has been defined by the Commission in a working paper on *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – a European Reference Framework* in 2004 as ‘the disposition and ability to organise and regulate one’s own learning, both individually and in groups. It includes the ability to manage one’s time effectively, to solve problems, to acquire, process, evaluate and assimilate new knowledge, and to apply new knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts — at home, at work, in education and in training. In more general terms, learning to learn contributes strongly to managing one’s own career path.’

2. BACKGROUND

A meeting was held on 27th October 2006 of the Cluster on Key Competences – curriculum reform - to establish priorities for the work of the cluster and to determine the specific priorities for the Flanders Peer Learning Activity. The objectives for the PLA were then set out in the meeting minutes.

It was decided that the work of the Cluster would focus on cross-curricular key competences: how they are best included in curricula and implemented; their status in evaluation systems; their role in promoting educational excellence and the way in which the implementation of key competences might best be assessed and measured. Furthermore, it was decided that in future PLAs, the Cluster would examine which policies are likely to be most successful in respect of the implementation of key competences for lifelong learning.

3. THE FLANDERS PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY

The objective of the PLA was to provide an opportunity for participants to discuss how schools can be encouraged and supported in implementing the ‘Learning to Learn’ approach in relation to the delivery of cross-curricular objectives.

The PLA was structured around the peer learning methodology that was initially set out in the *Operational Guide for Clusters and Peer Learning Activities (PLAs)* in the context of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme (March 2006) and which will subsequently be further developed.

The PLA included an examination of the policy process in relation to cross-curricular objectives in Flanders: how they are developed, formulated and supported; the status of

key competences in the curriculum, how stakeholders are involved; what main factors affect their implementation and evaluation-related issues. A priority was to consider the key competence ‘Learning to Learn’.

To prompt discussions on policy-related issues, the Flemish hosts provided examples of the Learning to Learn approach and organised two site visits - one to a secondary school and one to a teacher training college. Additionally, a programme of speakers was organised which included contributions from a school head teacher, school teachers, the Flemish Department for Education and Training, the teacher education institution and the inspection service.

The presentations provided interesting examples of contrasting approaches to the development of key competences for lifelong learning with particular regard to ‘learning to learn’ and the achievement of cross-curricular objectives.

The presentations were introduced and chaired by members of the Cluster Group in order to encourage discussion of policy-related issues of relevance both in the Flemish context and in the context of the other countries represented at the PLA.

The educational system in Flanders

Part of the role of the consultants assisting the Commission is to analyse the main trends in those countries that are participating in PLAs on key competences. Below, a short summary of the situation in Flanders is provided.

The concept of ‘Learning to Learn’ is a strong feature of the Flanders educational system – both in schools and in teacher training. The Federal Government has no competences concerning education: education has been the competence of the regional Governments since 1989. Two important principles are: *freedom for providers of education to establish and maintain schools - and pedagogical autonomy*.

There is a diversity of providers: the State; Local Authorities; private organisations (mainly Catholic). There are no ‘catchment areas’ for schools. The freedom to choose a school is genuine for most: Flanders is densely populated, so there are almost always several possible schools within reach. Schools operate in ‘networks’ – supervised by School Boards. These can vary in size between one or two schools – to over a hundred. The principle of an ‘entitlement curriculum’ operates. There is an ‘*Entitlement to a challenging curriculum*’.

A central question in education in Flanders is the delivery of high quality education when the following factors are present: diverse provision from autonomous schools; a national core curriculum; no centrally organised examination or testing system; input funding based on the number of pupils. The roles of the Advisory Bodies were outlined: VLOR – Flanders Educational Council; VLIR – Flanders University Council; VLHORA – Flanders Council of Colleges of Higher Education. Pedagogical Advisers and the Inspectorate have key roles in the provision of quality assurance in the National Curriculum.

Key features of the Flanders educational context include:

- Very high scores on the PISA test for mathematical knowledge at age fifteen. Also in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). However, there is low social equity with a very large gap between the performances of the highest and lowest scoring pupils

- The current Minister regards improving the performance of the under-performing group as a high priority
- There also very significant differences in performance between schools with very similar socio-economic profiles which raises the issue of how teaching practice is managed
- There is a gap between the basic competence of the teacher and their actual professional performance at a higher level.

There will shortly be an increase in in-service training funding and monitoring of teacher performance. In-service training can be either supply or demand-led, in that schools can request extra support. Currently, there is no nationally organised system of pupil assessment and there does not appear to be support amongst most teachers for this. Teaching staff in general do not wish to be compared, but would nevertheless like to have a better understanding of how they are performing. There is a concern that this would lead to ‘teaching to the test’. There is however a realisation that there is likely to be increased testing in future, with more feedback on performance. There is a need to ‘raise the bar’ of achievement.

The Minister and the Department for Education and Training (with significant involvement from the Curriculum Division) is conducting a survey of standards of attainment in secondary schools, through a series of tests taken by students – with schools volunteering to participate.

The principles on which this is based are: preserving the autonomy of school; equal opportunities; acceptable levels of pressure for teachers; transparency – in which benefits should be obvious to users; avoiding ‘teaching to the test’, ‘league tables’ and any decline in professional involvement.

3.1. Cross-curricular objectives: concept and development. ‘Learning to learn’ in Flanders

In Flanders, the Curriculum Division of the Department for Education provides ‘*scientifically well founded advice to the Government and Minister of Education*’. Cross-curricular objectives are promoted by means of an inter-relationship between: the National Core Curriculum (Department of Education); school audit (School Inspectorate) and guidance/counselling for teachers and schools (Pedagogical Advisory Service).

One of the speakers noted that in the secondary sector, subject traditions are strong and there are challenges in promoting a cross-curricular approach. In relation to implementation, it was noted that while the Department of Education may seek to introduce policy innovations relating to methodology, in practice there are obstacles in affecting change insofar as policy initiatives inevitably undergo a process of ‘filtering’ by national educational bodies and subsequently by teachers. There is therefore a bridge to cross between policy planning and implementation. Furthermore, the Curriculum Division emphasised that any curricular or methodological innovation needs to ensure that the study burden for pupils remains at a reasonable level.

Another viewpoint expressed was that in the Flanders context cross-curricular objectives should be regarded as a complement to subject final objectives. In other words, each subject has certain objectives which have to be attained by students, whereas cross-curricular objectives have to be strived for. These are often difficult to measure and require school-wide co-ordination. There is a need to identify the factors which support - and factors which hinder implementation of cross-curricular objectives.

3.2. School visit: Working with cross-curricular objectives and ‘Learning to Learn’

Koninklijk Atheneum Vilvoorde is a Flemish Community Secondary School. There is a strong emphasis in the school on pupil counselling and support. The school practises internal self-evaluation which is carried out by teachers themselves. In addition to self-evaluation, the school inspectorate undertakes external evaluation, but this is designed to be constructive with the inspector in the role of ‘critical friend’.

A trend towards less governmental regulatory activity in the area of education was noted by the headteacher. He expressed the view that ‘*a highly autonomous school is viewed as a top quality school*’. School autonomy is also viewed in wider literature as helping to contribute towards the development by students of key competences for lifelong learning, although there are mixed views on this issue.

In the school where the site visit took place, in terms of progress towards cross-curricular attainment, there are six extramural Integrated Working Periods (IWPs) during a school year, each lasting one week. The school inspectors had praised the school’s approach to cross-curricular attainment targets as a model of good practice. One difficulty identified however is the challenge of ensuring that pupils and teachers know when they have attained these targets.

In order to support pupils in learning to learn, pupil counselling is offered. Individual coaching can be provided at the request of either the pupil – or the Class Committee (which consists of all teachers who teach a particular class). Some projects are also arranged which combine curricular and extra-curricular study – for instance a health project and an environmental project. It was noted that IWPs have positive motivational benefits for students in particular by involving students in planning project activities, project implementation and evaluation of the success of work undertaken.

The Working Group noted the way the Flemish educational system provides scope for autonomy – and a democratic approach within schools. This democratic approach appears to contribute towards a relaxed, constructive atmosphere in school (which is important in terms of promoting student autonomy and a cooperative approach to work between students and staff).

The quality of leadership of the headteacher was also identified as a crucial factor in promoting appropriate strategies and conditions for the development of ‘Learning to Learn’. Effective management by the headteacher and senior management team is also important in terms of keeping pressure on teachers at a reasonable level.

The holding of regular team meetings and an effective teamwork approach between the headteacher, senior management and teaching staff are also clearly central to ensuring an openness to innovation and the development of effective teaching and learning styles both in respect of key competences and more widely.

Each class has its own Class Council and there is also an overall Student Council. This approach was viewed as helping to contribute towards a culture of participation and of students taking responsibility for matters related to learning, personal relationships and the effective operation of the school.

3.3. Site Visit: Artefelde Hogeschool

Artefelde Hogeschool is an institute of higher education which offers initial professional training for those entering teaching and various other professions. The Director of Studies (secondary education) referred to the strong tradition in Flanders of child-centred experiential education. In secondary education, however, an integrated approach to learning is far less common, as the curriculum tends to be somewhat rigidly divided into subject specialism. This means that there is a need for greater attention to be paid to enabling students to attain cross-curricular objectives.

In the recently introduced new curriculum for teacher training, the teaching of cross-curricular skills is now integrated from the outset of the course. The new course is centred around thematic modules. Trainee teachers are encouraged to develop their own planning strategies for their studies. Many student teachers however are not accustomed to this approach.

In order to implement a cross-curricular approach giving real responsibility in learning to the learners, lecturers at the Institute felt that there were a number of necessary pre-conditions or critical success factors. These included developing a shared vision for the school; adapting learning materials to accommodate a cross-curricular approach; forging a strong link between student learning strategies and appropriate teaching styles. Another important development highlighted was that new teachers in schools are now entitled to receive in-service training once they are in post.

In subsequent discussions held as part of the PLA site visit, there was broad agreement on the problems of adjusting education systems to these approaches in order to achieve desired aims and objectives in respect of key competences for 'Learning to Learn'.

It was also emphasised that other key competences - social and interpersonal skills; education for citizenship; environmental education; health education - are equally important. In reality, these key competences are interdependent with 'Learning to Learn'. A crucial learning point is that if a school succeeds in delivering key competences for 'Learning to Learn', there is a much greater likelihood of effective delivery of other key competences.

In summary, the PLA site visit raised a number of common questions and challenges in relation to 'Learning to Learn'. These will need further consideration at subsequent PLAs and include:

- Who within the school environment should take responsibility for the delivery of cross-curricular themes?
- How should the ‘Rubicon be crossed’ from primary to secondary education in terms of ensuring that a strong cross-curricula dimension is retained?
- To what extent is self-evaluation prevalent in schools and how can this be further promoted?

3.4. Presentations from other participants in the PLA

SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN SPAIN

A presentation was made by the representative attending the PLA from Spain. An explanation was provided of the school system in Spain with particular regard to school autonomy and its link with key competences.

The pedagogical autonomy of each school has is put in a concrete form in the School Education Project and a School Management Project along with its own organisational rules. The School Education Project is comprised of a number of components including: the action, relationships between the family and the school, participation and a ‘living together’ plan (a strategic framework for ensuring a harmonious community in school, dealing with bullying, inter-personal issues etc.).

A new Education law was passed in May 2006 and new curricula for primary and secondary education are about to be implemented. These new curricula introduce for the first time key competences in primary and secondary education. Eight key competences are defined in the law and the Ministry of Education and Autonomous Regions have the task of disseminating this new teaching approach among teachers.

A STUDENT-FOCUSED APPROACH TO MATHEMATICS TEACHING IN AUSTRIA

A presentation was then made by the representative attending the PLA from Austria. This focused on mathematics teaching in the context of key competences.

Students work in a variety of ways: individually, in pairs and in groups. The speaker emphasised that teaching mathematics in this way is not just about teaching the subject but also has wider aims including the development of social and inter-personal skills by the students, as well as the ability to discuss and defend concepts, make presentations to the group and offer support to each other in the process of learning.

Feedback from students is an important aspect of the work in terms of understanding what worked well and less well and ways in which course content and methodology might be improved in future. If possible, the speaker suggested, pupils should collaborate with minimal intervention from the teacher. However, he commented that, in Austria, ‘teachers always want to **teach** the pupils.’

If pupils have for example grasped a particular concept, they may be asked to explain this to the class – or in small groups to other pupils. In getting students to participate in teaching specific concepts to their classmates, it tests and strengthens their understanding of subject matter.

Didactic features include: reflection, acquisition and transfer; understanding of learning matter – as opposed to learning by heart; pupils choose and structure the most important results. They are also encouraged to develop skills in terms of learning how to summarise; take responsibility within the group; avoid merely quoting from textbooks and to develop expertise in particular areas.

In summary, the presentation clarified the potential benefits of involving students centrally in the learning process so that they develop much deeper understandings of subject matter as well as their ability to learn autonomously.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF KEY COMPETENCES IN CROATIA

In the subsequent presentation, one of the representatives attending the PLA from Croatia provided an explanation of developments in the school system in relation to the implementation of key competences.

In the Croatian school system, there was a strong desire to achieve more active teaching and learning styles. ‘Learning to Learn’ skills are beginning to be implemented in many schools, but not yet in a systematic way. In each school, there is a pedagogical counsellor or a psychologist. Their job includes giving support to teachers in the implementation of key competences and learning to learn. Linkages were emphasised here with education in democratic citizenship. The weakest element of key competences at present in the view of the speaker was entrepreneurial education.

A new national curriculum was introduced in 2005 in Croatia. However, the curriculum remains strongly subject-divided – and overcrowded in terms of content. Integration of subjects and indeed correlation between subjects are both difficult to achieve in reality.

Teachers are however being encouraged to focus on the active and interactive pedagogical involvement of pupils in the process of learning. Teachers should be encouraged to move away from the concept of merely transferring knowledge. The Movement for Democratic Citizenship has helped many teachers to change their approach in this regard, however.

Another issue raised was the dominant role of ‘frontal teaching’ (a teacher-led and teacher-centred approach) and how to change this. Significant and profound internal changes will be necessary for the teaching profession in order to achieve this.

Regional Teacher Councils support and organise in-service training. Another mechanism for supporting teachers' development is that teacher co-ordinators have now been put in place. These are experienced teachers who lead in delivering training to others. Balanced against the need for change in teaching, there is a danger however that too much change may be required – at too fast a pace and there is therefore a need to ensure that change is managed effectively in the context of key competences for lifelong learning.

The teacher also gave a description of a national project in which secondary school students undertake a specific study of a particular social issue or problem within the school or the local community, undertake collaborative research on issues involved and make a formal presentation of their conclusions to the school authorities and / or the local council. This was viewed by PLA participants as representing good practice in the development of key competences for lifelong learning.

In summary, one of the main learning points was that effective policies need to be developed to enable teachers to move away from the concept of solely transferring knowledge to students to an approach characterised by the teacher as facilitator of the students' learning. Another policy lesson is that change should not be imposed at too rapid a pace.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF KEY COMPETENCES IN HUNGARY

A presentation was then made by one of the representatives attending the PLA from Hungary who focused on issues relating to the development of appropriate approaches to the teaching of key competences.

Teacher training in Hungary is now being refocused towards an approach that stresses firstly developing the right attitudes to teaching and learning, secondly appropriate skills and thirdly, based on these – appropriate knowledge and competences for the job.

Comparisons were made between how teachers learn and pupil learning with particular reference to the latest research into how the brain works. In the context of the Bologna process, Hungarian universities are working on master's level degrees. A master's degree in teacher education is being developed, with an emphasis on planning and controlling learning processes. There is a need to consider the relationship between: education, expertise, methodology and practice. The intention is to create a new kind of teacher training combining methodology and practice, with a central role for case studies and video training.

The intention is to create a practice-oriented educational theory and psychology – in both initial and in-service training. Each practising teacher will be required to acquire 120 credits over a seven-year period, keeping up-to-date with current methodology – and building new knowledge into classroom practice. Schools have to fit their in-service programme to the requirements of the National Curriculum – and to focus on key competences. Each school has its own education plan, which has to be related to the school in-service plan. Schools have to define the methodology which they intend using to develop active learning methods.

With regard to the main policy lessons, a key point was the centrality of both appropriate initial teacher training and in-service training for practising teachers in respect of key

competences. The use of a credits system to accredit teachers' in-service training activities is potentially a useful model that could be replicated elsewhere.

4. MAIN POINTS OF DISCUSSION WITHIN THE PLA

Following the country-specific presentations, participants in the PLA then discussed some of the practices and policy lessons that had been outlined both through the site visits and in the presentations. An analysis of some of the key points is provided below:

The Cluster group's perception of the Flanders educational system is that there is a clear overall national framework for school education. It was noted that within this framework there is a climate of support and encouragement – and respect for the autonomy of schools. Effective communication was identified as absolutely critical to developing appropriate teaching methodologies and contexts for learning. This appears to be more effective in comparison with a more prescriptive approach.

The discussion turned to address broader principles which are drivers of effective change. Below, these are examined under a number of key headings:

Teaching and learning methods

For the effective delivery of lifelong learning, there has to be a school-wide ethos of 'learning to learn' – an understanding by all teachers and pupils of why and how learning takes place.

Effective strategies need to be devised for developing a core curriculum approach. The curriculum in many countries is still largely subject-based – particularly at secondary level. There was broad agreement amongst PLA participants on the scope for a greater focus on a cross-curricular approach to learning.

There is presently a concentration in many countries on Knowledge and Skills alone – rather than on Attitudes or Understanding. This is despite governmental pronouncements in relation to the importance of a competence-based approach. A key problem is the difficulty inherent in moving beyond policy statements in respect of a competence-based approach to actual implementation at school level. This was attributed to a complex inter-play of factors including institutional reluctance to change in some schools as well as a reluctance amongst some individual teachers to embrace change.

Headteacher training

There was agreement that improving the leadership skills of headteachers is crucial in promoting a key competences approach. However, a central question is whether headteachers are principally educational managers or pedagogical leaders. Leadership academies for headteachers/principals have been established in a number of EU countries. PLA participants felt that it would be instructive to look at their operation in relation to training headteachers in managing educational change.

Initial teacher training

PLA participants discussed issues relating to the content of initial teacher training curricula as well as methodological approaches to initial teacher training.

The overarching goal in terms of initial teacher training is to assist new teachers in delivering a competence-based curriculum. In practice, this means ensuring that those involved in teacher education develop a sufficiently deep understanding of, and commitment to, a competence-based approach. Initial teacher training must be designed in such a way that teacher trainers can operate as facilitators of learning – and in turn through this process enable teachers beginning their teaching careers to replicate this.

In-service training

The Flanders PLA noted that in many EU countries new curricula are being introduced and new approaches to teaching and learning are being encouraged. There is a need to develop shared goals and understandings so that teachers and headteachers speak the same educational language as the inspectors/advisers and officials working in Ministries of Education.

Higher education also has an essential role in carrying out effective and relevant educational research in the area of key competences in schools – and in facilitating collaborative research by teachers themselves. This process is primarily about nurturing and encouraging the ‘reflective practitioner’.

Support for teachers

One of the key issues discussed through the PLA was the need to establish an effective process of dissemination that helps teachers understand what Key Competences are and gives them guidance on how to work with key competences in the classroom.

There is of course a need for support through initial teacher training and in-service training – but also there should be facilities and incentives for teachers who are innovative and pro-active in implementing Key Competences with their students.

The Flanders concept of an in-school co-ordinator for cross-curricular objectives was considered to be a potentially effective model for coordinating teachers’ development and helping them to achieve the delivery of key competences in schools.

Another issue raised was that in many Member States, school inspectors have a lot of power and influence. They would often like to be in a position to help and support headteachers but there are practical considerations as to how can this be achieved.

Similarly, many EU countries have individual subject and also cross-curricular advisers who play a vital role in supporting educational change. In other Member States, the educational psychology service plays a key role in this regard.

Pupil assessment

It is crucial that pupil assessment is formative as well as summative – so that it supports and informs the learning process as well as delivering a judgement of performance at the end of a course. Pupil assessment needs to reflect a competence-based curriculum. Otherwise the demands of subject-based assessment/examinations/tests will always marginalise key competences. This has implications both at school and at the national level. A key consideration is whether national systems of testing and external examinations support or act against a competence-based approach.

Other issues relating to pupil assessment include how the need to develop pupils as independent learners with a real understanding of the learning process in which they are involved (meta-cognition) – can be reconciled with the demands of external assessment. This is evidently an issue for further exploration in subsequent PLAs.

School evaluation

Issues relating to evaluation in schools including the role of self-evaluation were discussed. Amongst the findings were that the approach to evaluation should reflect the centrality of key competences and a cross-curricular approach to learning. Otherwise, there is a danger that once again key competences risk becoming marginalised within the curriculum. However, there are very real difficulties in measuring performance in relation to the attainment of cross-curricular objectives. In most EU countries, there is as yet no measurement framework in place in this regard.

Another issue discussed was the role of assessment of value added by schools in relation to ensuring social inclusion. However, there are inevitably practical obstacles in devising an appropriate measurement framework to assess added value in schools in an appropriately sensitive way. In this regard, there was a debate as to whether it is possible – or indeed desirable – to compare the performance of one school with another, given widely differing key variables. Comparisons between schools are inevitable, but for a school working with deprived children, ‘ranking’ can be highly detrimental.

Developing a framework to facilitate and support the development of key competences for lifelong learning – key questions

In assessing the appropriateness of policies that could potentially be adopted or replicated which facilitate and support the development of key competences for lifelong learning, a number of key questions will need to be posed. In particular, a representative from the European Training Foundation (ETF) stated that there is a need to examine the relationship between policy aims and objectives in relation to the implementation of key competences, support available to teachers and schools to achieve these aims - and external constraints.

- Are the aims and objectives of a particular policy approach clear and understandable?
- Are they broadly accepted by Government, parents, employers and other stakeholders?
- What are the external constraints likely to influence the chances of success of a given policy approach?

- Are the expectations reasonable?
- What support is there: training, resources, external support, internal support within the school?

Other considerations that will need to be taken into account in assessing the appropriateness of different policy approaches to the promotion of key competences are likely to include:

- The need for examples of good practice demonstrating how key competences for lifelong learning have been successfully implemented, drawing on examples from the Member States
- The importance of examining mechanisms available which might allow educational providers and practitioners to ‘speak with the same voice’
- The imperative of focusing more closely on process in education rather than on results alone
- The need to provide opportunities for reflection for educationalists and teachers in schools as part of the implementation of a key competences approach

5. EMERGING POLICY QUESTIONS: FACILITATING AND SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF KEY COMPETENCES FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Having set out key elements from the Flanders Peer Learning Activity, initial policy conclusions in relation to devising and implementing policies to facilitate and support the development of key competences for lifelong learning are now drawn¹.

5.1. Overall policy issues

1. The Flanders PLA activity prompted discussion on a number of major policy-related issues in relation to the implementation of key competences for lifelong learning

¹ A short paper has been produced on this issue by the consultants CSES and will be made available separately.

2. These included the need to achieve effective communication in managing school education, developing the autonomous school and engendering a democratic approach to school management
3. In relation to the need to achieve effective communication between all key actors in school education, it will be necessary to consider in detail the relationship between the macro, meso and micro levels (broadly speaking the levels of national policy, school management - and the pupils' immediate learning environment) in order to achieve change in actual educational practice – in the teaching and learning behaviours and attitudes of teachers and pupils.

It will be essential to the work of the cluster on key competences (and future PLAs) to identify the factors supporting and hindering the implementation of key competences for lifelong learning – in order to develop an effective strategy that will go beyond mere rhetoric and deliver the required changes in teaching and learning approaches.

4. As far as school autonomy is concerned, there would appear to be a need to allow a measure of school autonomy within education systems, in order to create the freedom necessary for schools to develop their own ethos of learning – and to experiment with new curricula and new approaches to teaching and learning.

On the other hand, however, if schools were simply allowed to function autonomously, with little or no outside inputs or influences, there is a risk that they may simply replicate traditional teaching methods and this could lead to ineffective practice. If schools are to develop as autonomous (self-managing) learning communities, this has implications in terms of national authorities being prepared to develop national frameworks which empower schools to make decisions on their own teaching methodologies and various aspects of school management – and in terms of developing systems of pupil assessment and school evaluation that allows these freedoms to operate.

5. Another policy lesson was that there needs to be a democratic approach to school management as a pre-condition for innovation and teamwork amongst staff and for promoting student autonomy in learning, the development of a co-operative approach to work between students and staff and more harmonious personal and working relationships within schools.
6. Furthermore, specific policies need to be developed at national level to encourage 'democratic schooling' – as a prerequisite for the development of key competences for the individual student. National authorities also need to consider putting in place support structures to ensure that schools are able to manage the transition to more democratic approaches, whilst retaining the confidence of local authorities, parents, employers and wider society (and not least pupils themselves) that a suitable and secure framework for the orderly and efficient operation of the school remains in place.

5.2. Challenges were identified by PLA participants in relation to taking forward the work of the Key Competences Cluster

Managing change in schools

The quality of leadership of the headteacher was identified as a crucial factor in promoting appropriate strategies and conditions for the development of 'Learning to Learn'. Effective management by the headteacher and senior management team would appear to create the conditions under which teachers are more ready to be innovative in their teaching methodologies.

For the effective delivery of lifelong learning, a critical success factor is the presence of a school-wide ethos of 'learning to learn' – an understanding by all participants of why and how learning takes place. For example, the headteacher and senior management team – in the Flanders model – take a lead in developing a shared vision for the school; adapting learning materials to accommodate a cross-curricular approach; forging a strong link between student learning strategies and appropriate teaching styles.

It is the task of the school leadership team to create a culture of participation and of students taking responsibility for matters related to learning, personal relationships and the effective operation of the school. However, the fundamental role of national policy-makers in this context is to develop an appropriate political and administrative climate in which the creation of such a culture in schools is achievable.

Changes in teaching and learning styles

There needs to be a profound and lasting change in teaching methodologies to reflect a major shift in emphasis from the teacher to the learner, and to incorporate the concept of each student learning how to learn, taking account of their own preferred learning styles. Each student needs to understand at a personal level the need for lifelong learning – and to know how to manage their own learning throughout life. Models of good practice in this respect need to be developed in each country as well as on a Community-wide basis. This successful practice needs to be easily available to teachers.

Teachers need to be convinced of the need for this change – and to know how to manage this new approach to learning. This is central to the process of developing key competences for lifelong learning – and requires the development of well thought-out policies at national level that will empower teachers to bring about the necessary fundamental changes in approach.

Appropriate support mechanisms need to be put in place, at school, local/regional and national levels, to enable teachers to master new approaches to pedagogy. 'Learning to learn' and a competence-based approach need to be integrated into all learning activities – even if specific periods of cross-curricular activity can provide points of focus and opportunities for students to take on a larger share of responsibility for managing their own learning.

Initial teacher training

Practice in initial teacher training has to reflect the need for newly qualified teachers to be able to foster the development of key competences for pupils through an interactive approach to learning. This approach must have equal importance in the initial teacher education curriculum itself and in the methodologies employed by lecturers at this level.

Student teachers and newly qualified teachers can be used as agents of change – if they are supported in using competence-based approaches in the context of their periods of teaching practice – and of their initial years in their first post. A new partnership in terms of achieving methodological change needs to be forged between universities/teacher training institutions and schools. The concept of ‘training schools’ (as for instance in the Netherlands and the UK) needs to be explored further through the activities of future PLAs.

For instance, in the recently introduced new curriculum for teacher training in Flanders, the teaching of cross-curricular skills is now integrated from the outset of the course. The new course is centred around thematic modules. Trainee teachers are encouraged to develop their own planning strategies for their studies.

In-service training

Professional development opportunities for serving teachers need to be expanded in scope and made an entitlement for all teachers – with particular reference to enabling teachers to gain the attitudes, skills, competences - and confidence - to develop collaborative ways of working with students. There is also a need for teachers to learn to work together collaboratively across subject divisions, so that cross-curricular objectives can be achieved and the holistic nature of learning addressed – especially in the context of managing the learning process in an information age. Teachers will also need to learn together across different phases of education (early years, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary) to ensure progression and consistency of approach for pupils.

Another emerging policy finding in relation to in-service training is that it will need to be focused more closely on the in-school situation. An example in this regard was provided by the representative from the European Training Foundation who quoted a recent European study on the effectiveness of in-service training in education, which found that if in-service training is ‘decontextualised’, it produces little effect, as the teachers return to the ‘conservative hinterland’ of the school, where the implementation of change is often highly problematic.

The system of accreditation of in-service training, as presented by the representative from Hungary, is a potentially interesting model to systematise in-service training for teachers as part of a commitment to their continuous professional development that could be replicated elsewhere. This possibility could also be discussed at future PLAs.

Pupil assessment

The assessment of pupil performance at the school level - and at the national level - needs to recognise the centrality of key competences and cross-curricular objectives. It should be formative, as well as summative, acting as a means of involving the pupil more deeply in the whole learning process and providing the opportunity for reflection and feedback, both from the pupil’s and the teacher’s point of view.

The needs of the pupil as an independent learner need to be reconciled with the demands of external assessment and the attainment of external qualifications. This will require much further investigation through future PLAs, in particular through a comparative assessment of the various models of pupil assessment in operation at Member State level.

School evaluation

Our initial assessment based on discussions at the PLA – as well as drawing on wider literature – suggests that an appropriate model of school evaluation in the context of developing key competences could involve a combination of internal self-evaluation together with an element of external evaluation of teaching and learning practice, school management and other aspects of the operation of the school. External evaluation might include an assessment being undertaken by locally based inspectors with a specific responsibility for the school, an ‘outside’ view of the school from an independent inspector or team of inspectors – and possibly also peer review by colleagues from other schools. The place of student evaluation of learning activities and other aspects of school life also has to be considered as part of an effective evaluation framework in respect of key competences for lifelong learning.

The various models of inspection practised in those Member States participating in the Cluster will make for interesting debate as to what kinds of systems of school evaluation are most effective in relation to the development of key competences within the curriculum and of a competence-based approach to learning.

5.3. Other important issues referred to within the discussions of this first PLA

Literacy provision

Literacy provision was established as an important work priority for the Cluster at the meeting on 27.10.06. Mother tongue education is clearly of central importance in the establishment of a competence-based approach which seeks to empower the student as an autonomous learner. It could also provide a useful subject-specific base for comparative examination of current practice and possible models for the future in relation to the work of the Cluster.

Key competences for students with special educational needs

Special educational needs is also clearly a subject which requires serious consideration by the Cluster – given that the percentage of students with identifiable special educational needs is usually defined as twenty per cent of the overall student population. The *Recommendation of the Council and the European Parliament on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (November 2005)* requested Member States to ‘ensure that education and training offers all young people the means to develop key competences to a level that equips them for adult life and further learning; as well as to *pay specific attention to those with educational disadvantage.*’

There was recognition at the PLA that the full range of complex issues relating to the provision of special education was outside the scope of the work of the Cluster. However, the inclusion within future discussions regarding the requirements of – firstly – those students with specific educational needs and –secondly – those students suffering from a range of other potential and actual educational disadvantages (such as social and economic deprivation, recent immigrant status, membership of Roma and other traveller communities etc.) would seem to be highly relevant in relation to key competences. The issue of low social equity in specific Member States in relation to student performance in comparative international surveys is highly relevant in this context.

5.4. Initial policy findings and points for further debate at future PLAs:

- Whilst comparison and exchange of ideas and experience between different EU countries is potentially very helpful, strategies for change in practice will need to be adapted to country-specific contexts
- In order to establish testing grounds for the implementation of key competences for lifelong learning in school curricula, it may be possible to establish experimental schools in individual Member States that are given the freedom to implement a competence-based curriculum, with substantial advice and support from national and local authorities. Such schools already exist in a number of EU countries. It would be particularly instructive to link such schools together in order to help them share best practice – and to help them in their essential task of acting as role models for other schools in their country.
- More generally, trans-national co-operation at the European level provides an important opportunity to consider divergence in educational systems – as well as convergence trends in some areas - and scope for sharing best practices. Opportunities for policy-makers, teachers and head teachers, advisory and support staff (and indeed students) to meet together and to share ideas and experiences on a trans-national basis should be maximised - in the first instance through the work of the Key Competences Cluster and the PLAs

Given that this was the first PLA activity in relation to key competences, at this stage it is not as yet appropriate to make policy recommendations. However, there are clearly a number of issues which will need to be pursued further in subsequent PLAs.

6. NEXT STEPS

- Emerging policy findings from the first PLA relating to key competences for lifelong learning will need to be taken into account in the organisation and content of subsequent PLAs, in particular the PLA in Hungary scheduled for September 2007
- To this end, this report will be circulated to all PLA participants. It will then also be made available to the wider EU-level Cluster via the Commission's electronic knowledge management system (the KS-LLL)
- At the end of the Flanders PLA, participants were asked to identify follow-up activities which they will take forward upon returning to their home country
- Country coordinators should participate in follow-up activities wherever possible since this will provide a mechanism for the Commission to follow up on the PLA and to assess its impact on promoting a key competences-based approach to lifelong learning in national education systems.

Annex: List of participants

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