



**European Union (Scrutiny) Act 2002**

**Report by the Minister for Education and Skills on Developments in the EU in the area of  
Education & Training during the Slovakian Presidency, 1 July – 31 December 2016**



**A N R O I N N | DEPARTMENT OF  
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION  
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

## **DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS**

### **EUROPEAN UNION (SCRUTINY) ACT 2002**

#### **SIX-MONTHLY REPORT ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EU DURING THE SLOVAKIAN PRESIDENCY:**

**1<sup>ST</sup> JULY – 31<sup>ST</sup> DECEMBER 2016**

The following report is submitted to the Oireachtas in accordance with section 2(5) of the EU (Scrutiny) Act 2002, and provides a summary of developments during the Slovakian Presidency of the EU in the area of education and training policy.

Information on developments in the areas of education and training can also be found on the website of the European Commission at:

[http://europa.eu/pol/educ/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/pol/educ/index_en.htm)

#### **Part 1: Education and Training Developments during the Slovakian Presidency.**

##### **Role of the EU in education & training:**

Under the Treaties governing the European Union, Member States have full responsibility for the organisation of their education and vocational training systems, the content of teaching and their cultural and linguistic diversity, while the EU's role is to encourage and facilitate cooperation and support and to supplement the actions of the Member States. In practice, the European Commission and Member States work together on a range of education and training policy areas according to Member States' mutual priorities, and with the objective of sharing best practice between national experts under the so-called "open method of coordination".

##### **EU Education Council of Ministers:**

EU Education Ministers generally meet at the Education Council in Brussels three times each year to discuss and agree policies for cooperation. In addition, an informal meeting of EU Education Ministers is occasionally held during each six-month Presidency. The preparation for the Education Council is carried out by the European Union's Education Committee. This working group is attended by the Education and Skills attaché, based in Brussels, as well as staff from International Section in the Department.

The Education Committee discusses and negotiates policies for European cooperation in education, and is the primary forum where Ireland can influence the drafting of agreed documents to reflect national priorities. These policies are then formally agreed and adopted by Ministers for Education at the Education Council of Ministers. The Education Committee met eleven times under the Slovakian Presidency. There was one Council of Education Ministers held under the Slovakian Presidency: on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016.

It should also be noted that following a referendum on the issue, the UK electorate voted in favour of leaving the EU on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016, immediately prior to the commencement of this Presidency. The UK did not, however, invoke the Article 50 process whereby it formally initiates negotiations to depart the EU during the course of this term. The Department of Education and Skills has nevertheless undertaken significant work internally in identifying risks and opportunities arising from the implications of the UK's departure. The Department also continued to participate in internal and inter-Departmental contingency planning on the issue as well as pursuing discussions with relevant stakeholders in the education community.

#### **1. EU Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council of Ministers, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016**

During the course of this Council, a **“Council Resolution on a New Skills Agenda for an inclusive and competitive Europe”** was adopted unanimously. The Resolution is a response to the Commission's Skills Agenda. It generally supports the initiative, which aims to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness.

Ministers also reached political agreement on a **“Council Recommendation on Upskilling pathways: New Opportunities for Adults”**, which was the Council's response to the Commission proposal on a Skills Guarantee. The reference to a guarantee was deleted in the agreed recommendation as it was argued that this may have led to a misunderstanding of the proposal by European citizens and it was of concern to a majority of Member States, including Ireland. Another change to the original Commission proposal was that national circumstances must be taken into account when implementing the recommendation.

**Conclusions of the Council on the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism** were also adopted. These were cross-sectoral conclusions and included input from justice and home

affairs working groups, including on counter terrorist propaganda and hate speech, as well as education policy.

A policy debate on **“Fostering and developing talent: Policies for discovering and drawing out the best in young people”** also took place. This closely followed one of the key themes of the Slovakian Presidency, that of recognising and promoting talent.

Ms Sharon McCooey, Senior Director of International Operations at LinkedIn – based in Ireland, introduced the debate, pointing to the importance of having the right structures in place in order to equip people with skills that are needed in the rapidly changing working environment. During the policy debate ministers reported on practices in their countries in promoting talent, e.g. by education system reforms, competitions and financial support. Ireland suggested that there is no ‘one size fits all approach’ to developing talent. The importance of investment was also emphasised.

## **2. Presidency Conference on Fostering and Development of Talent – 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

This flagship Presidency Conference examined issues around the identification and promotion of talent. Ireland was represented by the Education and Skills attaché in the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the EU. The Slovakian Presidency considered that this issue is of great importance and has huge potential for individuals as well as for the whole of society. Presentations at the conference confirmed that the recognition of talented individuals in childhood is a difficult but important task which provides the basis for appropriate guidance and education as the child develops.

The importance of inclusive education in the context of fostering talent was also recognised. Cooperation and the direct involvement of private enterprise in supporting the process of fostering and development of talent and providing opportunities for students to put their talents to practical use was also reinforced.

## **3. Meeting of Directors General of Higher Education – 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

The aim of this regular 2-day meeting is to give the Directors General for Higher Education from all Member States an opportunity to debate current topics on the European education agenda and share

best practices. Ireland was represented by the Higher Education Policy unit in the Department of Education and Skills.

The meeting in Bratislava focussed on the role of Institutions in regional development and emphasised the need for institutional engagement at regional level with relevant stakeholders.

#### **4. Directors General of VET Conference: “Apprenticeship: Better Training – Higher Skills – Great Opportunities” – 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

This meeting of the Directors General for vocational education and training was aimed at considering the implementation by Member States of actions set out in the Joint Declaration on a European Alliance for Apprenticeships of 2013. Ireland was represented at the meeting by the Further Education and Training Policy Unit of the Department and by SOLAS.

The object of the event was to reflect on the state of implementation and to share best practices in Member States, as well as to consider other possibilities for progress and reform of vocational education and training. Possibilities for enhanced cooperation with the private sector and employers were also shared. The Skills Agenda for Europe was discussed in the context of vocational education and training provision.

#### **5. Meeting of Directors General of Schools – 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> December 2016**

The meeting of Directors General for School Education focussed on the new Skills Agenda for Europe - in particular on increasing the level of basic skills including literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

Participants discussed issues of efficiency in the use of resources in the regional school system and the question of increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession as well as quality assurance in education.

Dr. Paul Downes gave a workshop on *Structural Indicators for Inclusive Systems in and around Schools*. Paul Downes is the Director of the Educational Disadvantage Centre in DCU's Institute of Education and a member of the School of Human Development.

The meeting also included a presentation of the latest results of the 2015 international PISA survey<sup>1</sup>, which were published on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2016.

## **6. Meeting of Bologna Follow Up Group – 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> December 2016**

The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) is the most important follow-up mechanism in the Bologna process<sup>2</sup> and is arranged by each Presidency to ensure continued commitment to the proposals most recently agreed at Ministerial level in May 2015:

- i. enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching;
- ii. fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives;
- iii. making our systems more inclusive;
- iv. implementing agreed structural reforms.

The latest meeting of the Group in December 2016, took place in Bratislava and was co-chaired by the Slovakian EU Presidency and Montenegro (chair from non-EU country). Ireland was represented by the Higher Education – Equity of Access and Qualifications unit from the Department of Education and Skills.

Issues addressed at the meeting included a thematic discussion on the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

## **Part 2: Developments in relation to the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund**

The European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) assists Member States provide active labour market supports to workers made redundant due to globalisation or the global economic and financial crisis. With a maximum annual budget of €150m, it provides 60% of the cost of approved projects. Member States whose youth unemployment rates exceeded 25% in 2012 can assist an equivalent number of young persons as targeted redundant workers within an EGF programme, where the young persons are under 25 years of age and not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

Following its closure in May 2016, the final report on the Andersen Ireland EGF Programme was submitted to the European Commission in November 2016. EGF supports were taken up by 138

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<sup>1</sup> The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey undertaken by the OECD which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. Students are assessed in science, mathematics, reading, collaborative problem solving and financial literacy.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.htm)

redundant workers (100% of those targeted) and 136 NEETS (99% of the target of 138). The final expenditure on the programme was €1.816m, equating to a utilisation rate of 73% of the approved allocation for the Programme, which compares favourably to the average EU allocation utilisation rate of some 55%. The Lufthansa Technik Airmotive Ireland programme ended on 19 September 2016 and its final report is due to be submitted to the European Commission by 19 March 2017. Supports continued to be provided under the PWA International EGF programme which runs until June 2017.

The eighteenth meeting of the Contact Persons for the EGF and Network Seminar was held in Dublin in October 2016 with Minister for Training, Skills and Innovation, John Halligan, T.D. giving the opening address. Participants undertook a number of site visits to meet Irish workers and young people who benefited from EGF supports. Information notes on 4 proposals submitted by the European Commission to the European Parliament and European Council for payment of a contribution from the EGF were submitted to the Clerks of the Dáil and Seanad, as follows:

<b>Commission Proposal Number</b>	<b>EGF Application Proposal</b>	<b>Council Decision Ref No</b>	<b>Council decision date</b>	<b>Date laid</b>	<b>EGF Amount approved</b>
COM (2016) 490	FI/Microsoft	CS-PRES/2016/ 12612 CSST/2016/12402	29/09/2016	27/09/2016	€5,364,000
COM (2016) 554	SE/Ericsson	CS-PRES/2016/12612 CSST/2016/12402	29/09/2016	27/09/2016	€3,957,918
COM (2016) 622	EE/Petroleum and Chemicals	CS-PRES/2016/ 14094 CSST/2016/13908	08/11/2016	30/10/2016	€1,131,358
COM (2016) 708	ES/Comunidad Valenciana automotive	CS-PRES/2016/ 15414 CSST/2016/15264	12/12/2016	08/12/2016	€856,800

### **Part 3: Developments in relation to the European Social Fund**

The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds, which also include the European Regional Development Fund, the Cohesion Fund (which Ireland no longer qualifies for), the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime & Fisheries Fund. The ESI Funds are designed to ensure that EU investment is targeted at Europe's long-term goals of jobs and growth.

In September, the European Commission, as part of the Mid-Term Review of the Multi-Annual Financial Framework, proposed a number of amendments to the Regulations underpinning the operation of the ESI Funds, including the ESF. In general, the amendments seek to increase flexibility, introduce further simplification measures and make some minor technical corrections.

Ireland is broadly supportive of the proposals and is actively engaging with the European Commission and Member State colleagues in negotiating the final amendments.

The European Commission has also proposed additional funding of €1 bn for the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) to be matched by the same amount from the European Social Funds allocation of the eligible Member States. Initially launched in 2013 with a budget of €3.2bn (€6.4bn including ESF allocation), the YEI tackles youth unemployment and supports the implementation of schemes under the Youth Guarantee, which aims to ensure that young people under the age of 25 receive a good quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship or traineeship within 4 months of leaving school or becoming unemployed. Ireland was one of 20 Member States eligible for YEI funding, as the youth unemployment rate in Ireland in 2012, at over 30%, exceeded the eligibility threshold of 25%. However Ireland is not eligible for the additional YEI funding as the youth unemployment rate has dropped below that threshold in the revised reference year of 2015. Ireland's YEI allocation of approximately €204 million (made up of €68 million of specific YEI funding, with matching amounts of ESF and Exchequer funds) is being administered as a dedicated priority axis within the ESF Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-20.

In October, the European Commission published a Synthesis Report on Ex-Post Evaluations of the 2007-2013 ESF Programmes, setting out a number of conclusions and lessons learned. Broadly speaking, the evaluation found that the ESF played a significant role in mitigating the negative effects of the financial crisis and that ESF-funded initiatives were effective in reaching target groups and providing support to groups that would otherwise not have been supported. The Commission also published an Ex-Post Evaluation specific to Ireland which noted that, during the 2007-13 period, target groups were effectively reached. It also found that the Programme responded flexibly to the onset of the financial crisis.

Meetings of the ESF Committee set up under Article 163 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union took place in October and December, in Brussels and Bratislava respectively. The ESF Committee membership is made up of government representatives and representatives of workers and employers organisations. The main items discussed during those meetings related to the Future of the ESF, the Skills Agenda, the Youth Employment Initiative and Simplification.



### **The Maltese presidency of the EU's Council of Ministers: January to June 2017.**

Malta will hold the Presidency of the EU for the first half of 2017 – for the first time since it joined the EU. The Maltese Presidency will focus on achieving a High Quality Education for all through 'Inclusion in Diversity', with a view to agreeing Council Conclusions on this theme.

The Maltese Presidency will also strive to make progress on the New Skills Agenda for Europe. The proposals on revisions to the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and Europass have both been passed to the Maltese Presidency from the Slovakian one without significant progress having been made on discussions.

In addition, during the course of this Presidency, it is expected that the European Commission will publish more information on its modernization of education initiative, which was announced in the Commissions Youth Package, published in December 2016. The reaction of the Presidency to the proposals will depend on the timing of that publication.