



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Report of the Minister for the Department of Education

Under Section 2 (5) of the European Union (Scrutiny) Act 2002 for the period from January to June 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Part 1 – Developments in the EU during the Portuguese Presidency (January to June 2021)	3
1. Meetings of the EYCS (Education) Council	3
1.1 Informal Videoconference of Education Ministers – 19 February 2021	3
1.2 EYCS (Education) Council – 17 May 2021	4
2. Other engagements in education and training	4
Part 2 – A look ahead to the Slovenian Presidency (July to December 2021)	6
Schedule of Council Meetings during the Slovenian Presidency	6
Meetings of European Council meetings (EU Heads of State or Government)	6
Meetings of EYCS (Education) Council	6
Overview of key issues likely to arise in the EYCS Council during the Slovenian Presidency	6

Introduction

This report is submitted to the Oireachtas in accordance with Section 2 (5) of the European Union (Scrutiny Act) 2002.

This Report has two parts. The first part summarises the key legislative and policy developments within the remit of the Minister for Education that arose during the period from January to June 2021 when Portugal held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The second part provides an overview of the Slovenian Presidency, which runs for the second half of 2021.

Part 1 – Developments in the EU during the Portuguese Presidency (January to June 2021)

The policy areas that fall within the responsibility of the Minister for Education are generally dealt with in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council in its Education formation.

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an effect on both the format and content of meetings during the Portuguese Presidency.

1. Meetings of the EYCS (Education) Council

The EYCS Council is normally held over two days, with Day 1 dedicated to Education and Youth and Day 2 dedicated to Culture and Sport items. The Youth, Culture and Sport items fall within the responsibility of other departments. Preparation for the EYCS (Education) Council takes place through the Education Committee, which is serviced by Ireland's Brussels-based Education Attaché.

Ministers with responsibility for Education and Training met on two occasions during the period from January to June 2021:

- Informal Videoconference of Education Ministers – 19 February 2021
- EYCS (Education) Council - 17 May 2021

1.1 Informal Videoconference of Education Ministers – 19 February 2021

Ireland was represented at this informal videoconference by the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, T.D. The meeting was chaired by the Portuguese Minister for Education, Tiago Brandão Rodrigues. The Commission was represented by Ms Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

Ministers exchanged views on the best policy practices on ensuring that education and training systems ensure equity of access, inclusion for success for all. Several ministers noted the heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and stressed the importance of face-to-face learning. They also focused on the need to promote further pre-school education.

Ministers also highlighted the need to ease the access to education for children and adults with special educational needs, for immigrants and refugees, and for those at risk of social exclusion.

Ministers were updated on progress in the establishment of the European Education Area. They were also informed of the adoption of a Council resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). The Council approved this resolution on 18 February 2021 through a written procedure. The presidency highlighted the five strategic priorities of the resolution, viz:

- improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training.
- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all.
- enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession.
- reinforcing European higher education.
- supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training.

The resolution includes concrete suggested actions for all five priorities as well as seven EU level targets.

1.2 EYCS (Education) Council – 17 May 2021

This meeting was the first Council to proceed in physical format since the start of the pandemic. In light of the ongoing travel restrictions, many Ministers were unable to attend in person, and as a result the majority of delegations were led by senior diplomatic officials. Ambassador Maeve Collins, the Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union led the Irish delegation. The meeting was jointly chaired by Manuel Heitor, the Portuguese Minister of Science, Technology and Higher Education and Tiago Brandão Rodrigues, the Portuguese Minister of Education, and the Commission was represented by Ms Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

The Council approved conclusions on the topic of equity of access, inclusion and success for all. The conclusions outline again these basic principles and the challenges that remain across the union in realising these basic principles. The conclusions call on Member States and the Commission to work together on policies to reduce low-achievement, improve inclusion and equity, to improve competencies and prevent unemployment. Ireland, supported by 14 other member states, expressed regret that references to the inclusion and prevention of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ learners in education and training was not acceptable to some Member States. Hungary and Poland both lodged written statements on gender and gender identity for inclusion in annexes to the conclusions.

The remaining items at this meeting of the EYCS (Education) Council were relevant to the Higher Education sector, which falls under the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science and are reported on in that Department's report.

Other engagements in education and training

In addition to engagement at ministerial level, officials from the Department of Education participated in a range of education and training related working groups during the Portuguese Presidency. These groups include:

- A meeting of the Directors General for schools
- A meeting of the Directors General for vocational education and training

- Co-operation and exchange groups in a range of areas including early childhood education; digital learning and education for sustainable development.

Officials from the Department of Education continue to engage with the European Institutions and Ministries from other members states to support policy development in Ireland and in response to bilateral requests.

The Portuguese Presidency continued the practice established by the Croatian Presidency and continued by the German Presidency, whereby regular information around the impact of the pandemic on education and training was captured and exchanged with all member states.

Part 2 – A look ahead to the Slovenian Presidency (July to December 2021)

Slovenia assumed the Presidency of the Council of the EU on 1 July 2021. The programme theme for the Presidency is 'Together. Resilient. Europe.'

The overarching priorities of the Slovenian Presidency are:

- Resilience, Recovery and Open Strategic Autonomy of the EU
- Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)
- A union of the European way of life, rule of law and equal criteria for all
- A credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood

Schedule of Council Meetings during the Slovenian Presidency

Meetings of European Council meetings (EU Heads of State or Government)

- European Council – 21/22 October - Brussels
- European Council – 16/17 December - Brussels

Meetings of EYCS (Education) Council

- EYCS (Education) Council – 29 November – Brussels

Overview of key issues likely to arise in the EYCS Council during the Slovenian Presidency

The Slovenian Presidency has set out an ambitious programme of work in the area of education and training for the second half of 2021:

- The European Education Area (Co-operation in Education and Training)
 - Finalising the mandates and establishing working groups based on the priority areas for co-operation up to 2025.
 - A Council Recommendation on the governance structures required to implement the European Education Area – due for adoption at the November Council meeting.
- Adult Learning
 - Council Conclusions on the topic of adult learning that respond to the Commission's Action Plan for Achieving the European Social Pillar and the Commission communication on achieving the European Education Area – due for adoption at the November Council meeting.
- Digital Learning
 - Council Conclusions on Blended Learning in Primary and Post-primary Schools in response to a forthcoming communication from the Commission on the topic – due for adoption at the November Council meeting.

- An conference on the topic of digital learning - currently planned for early November in Ljubljana.
- Synergies between Higher Education and Research
 - Discussions will be progress on the possibilities for greater synergies between the European Education Area and the European Research Area
- Progression of other files:
 - Commencement of a discussion on teacher academies under the Erasmus+ programme
 - Investment in education