

A Europe with no borders for learning

Platform



Scots are the wiser after joining an initiative to inform an EU policy on education, says **Alex Wood**

Developing a model for European regional colleges, schools that would incorporate best European practice, is the purpose of EdGate, a project partly funded by the EU. EdGate brought together educationists from nine countries for its conference in Vienna at the end of last month.

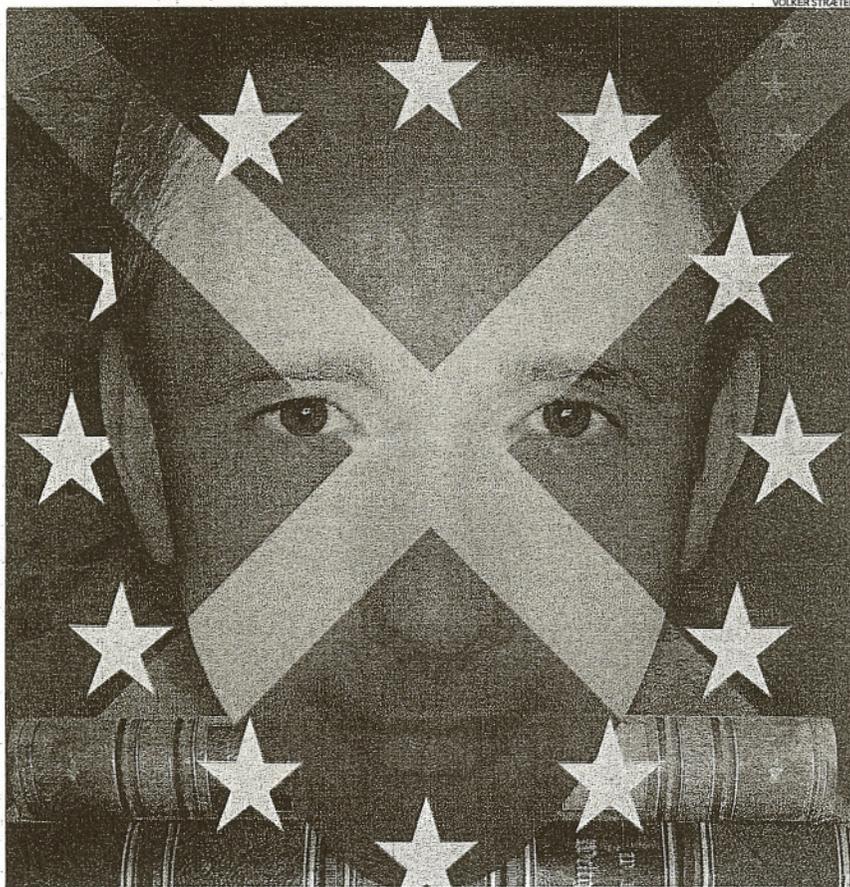
Marc Fähndrich, Vienna representative of the European Commission, set the background. "Globalisation means tough times for Europe," he declared. "There is no guarantee of jobs even after university graduation. Europe is a small continent which requires to be dynamic and competitive to face the developing world and such dynamism and competitiveness can come only from education."

The key skills to create a mobile generation for the 21st century will be languages, mathematical and scientific skills, social and interpersonal skills, and entrepreneurial skills, he said.

Franz Schimek, head of the EdGate project, urged participants to see education as a means to break barriers and to support regional development. Stuart Simpson, EdGate project co-ordinator, outlined the EdGate vision as the development of a model of 6-18 public sector schooling, free of charge, socially inclusive and with a common curriculum and certification system.

The conference looked at examples of good practice to support such a vision. Lynne Pratt of Moray House School of Education examined social inclusion and gender mainstreaming. She quoted one Edinburgh classroom teacher: "To me inclusion means what I have to do as a teacher to make available the same opportunities to everyone, regardless of circumstances or background, or physical or mental well-being."

"It means I have to be non-judgmental, to accept what has happened to them, who they are and what they believe in. It means I have to facilitate in any way I can their achievements at school, so that they leave with as many qualifications as pos-



sible so they can make their way in the world. That is my job."

The links between vocational education, ICT and social inclusion were stressed by Katharina Fillinger of Vienna, who quoted the 2002 Copenhagen declaration: "The European Council set the strategic objective of the European Union to become the world's most dynamic knowledge-based economy. The development of high-quality vocational education and training is a crucial and integral part of this strategy, notably in terms of promoting social inclusion, cohesion, mobility, employability and competitiveness."

The plea for balance in our expectations of education and for a refusal to idealise education's golden past was put by Marius Misztal of the Pedagogic University of

Cracow. He indicated that there were some teachers in Poland who harked back to a school culture dominated by rote learning and who perceived standards as having fallen. The overwhelming pressure, however, was for a more open, experiential approach to learning.

Employers in Poland, as elsewhere, require people who can solve problems and create a healthy balance between family and professional life. His hope was for a more genuinely pluralist pedagogy which was able to take into account the differing views of students, of teachers and employers.

Delegates came from five countries seeking EU membership, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, Ukraine and Rumania, as well as from Scotland, Ger-

many, Austria and Poland. Georgiy Kostylov, principal of School 155 in Kiev, shared perceptions of quality assurance in the Ukraine, a system presently based in substantial part on state directives and normative documents. The Scots present smiled wryly and compared and thought of *How Good Is Our School?* and our dearly beloved HMIE.

What shone through, however, were the enormous aspirations and the almost indefatigable optimism of educationists from nations creating open and democratic civil societies and seeking to galvanise education to that task. Again the issues of vocational education, the application of ICT and the citizenship and enterprise agendas, created a common bond between professionals.

Richard Easton of Edinburgh University addressed the philosophy underpinning the concept of the European regional college. While achievement and attainment were both at the top of the agenda, they were closely followed by inclusion, equality and active engagement, values and citizenship, and learning for life. Curriculum design should be underpinned firstly by both challenges and enjoyment, he said, and the concept that learning should and could be enjoyed was warmly received. The fundamental underpinning curricular principles were posed as breadth, balance, progression, depth, personalisation and choice, coherence and relevance.

Scottish delegates, without any complacency, were able to reflect with some pride on many of Scottish education's achievements. Discussions on the urgent requirement for social workers in schools from some regions reminded us of the unique strengths of Scotland's guidance system.

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'In the development of flexibility in the curriculum, Scotland stands ahead of many of the other nations, east or west, with their more centralised school systems?'

school systems. While citizenship and democratic education are a basic priority in the former command economies, Scotland's adoption of a creative citizenship agenda seems again a more genuinely pluralist and open approach than is yet the continental norm.

A group of students from the Vienna Bilingual School questioned a panel of the participants in English; here, in the practical illustration of the strength of modern language teaching, was one area where Scotland has yet to catch up with much of Europe. The great issues in Scottish education — the vocational curriculum, curricular flexibility, unqualified school-leavers (the NEET figures), social inclusion, the role of ICT in education — are issues in all of the participating countries.

While there are stark differences between the national experiences, the sharing of good practice is more than an academic exercise. Stuart Simpson, the project co-ordinator, ended his contribution by quoting the words of Carl Jung: "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances. If there is a reaction, both are transformed."

In developing new skills to tackle the great issues which touch schools and schooling across the continent, the educationists fortunate enough to have participated in EdGate have all been made wiser — perhaps even transformed.

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