

## Europe united - 29 Jun 2006

**Alex Wood looks at how countries across Europe have been sharing ideas and how this may help Scotland to move forward**

### Alex Wood

Education gate, commonly abbreviated to EdGATE, is a Europe-wide network of educationalists and related professionals, who exchange good practice in a range of areas. The network is funded by the European Union, and it is hoped that it will support economic growth. The identified priority areas are social inclusion, gender mainstreaming, quality assurance, teacher education, the European dimension in education, language tuition, vocational education and information and communications technology.



The second regional implementation meeting occurred in Vienna last year, with representatives attending from Germany, Austria and Scotland (from the established EU states), from Poland (from the new EU states) and from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine from other states developing new relationships with the EU. For hands-on educationalists, the first cultural shock was the enormous disparity in levels of provision. One of the delegations indicated that schools with one computer were the norm in their area. In one of the other participating cities unemployment rates have reached an astronomical 25 per cent. In another participating region the demise of traditional industries, steel in particular, and the growth of new forms of economic activity, were putting substantial pressures both on the social norms and on schools and colleges which now need to develop young people with a very different set of skills and outlooks from those which had been appropriate 20 years before. This is an economic and cultural circumstance remarkably similar to that in many areas of central Scotland.

For another region, the key priority was education in the European thinking on management, a vague concept until it was explained that organised crime remained a major factor in the economic and cultural mindset. Perhaps the aspiration of some of the participants from eastern Europe to develop “the mentality of modern European citizens” based on openness, inclusivity and equality represented an ideal as yet unachieved in the old Europe, let alone the new Europe. The issue may be less of the eastern European states learning from the western example, but rather more both areas advancing towards similar goals. Nonetheless what is clear is that the citizenship agenda, with its different details and its varying emphases, is as much a key curricular item in Kiev or Krakow as it is in Kirkcaldy or Gretna.

Interestingly, however, a comparison of primary class sizes in the established EU states shows Scotland with an average of 23.9 pupils, Germany 22.2, Poland 21.1 and Austria 20. Scottish schools may not, therefore, be labouring with a sole computer or addressing a culture of organised crime, but even among the established EU nations they are far from top of the league. Indeed with some 14 per cent of 16-19 year olds not in employment, education or training, the problems are significant and not dissimilar to those of several of the other participants. Scotland's present pilot programme of skills for work courses may offer a real break-through in supporting this cohort.

The common features of all the systems were, however, remarkable. Issues of "raising attainment" and "closing the gap" were common to all. How to prepare young people for the workplace, both in terms of specific skills and general attitudes, was also a universally acknowledged objective. Doing so in a way which did not sacrifice the broader aims of schools and of education was as big a problem for many of the delegates. The development of life-long learning was identified by delegates as essential in a world where skills became outdated and new skills were constantly required. Another term which is now common currency in UK education, "flexibility", was high on everyone's agenda, perhaps another of these terms, the very usefulness of which is predicated on the vagueness of its meaning.

Within this fascinating range of issues lie major debates and areas of contention. Even within the UK there are significant differences in the social inclusion agenda with what Ruth Levison has identified as three "discourses", redistributive (where resources are directed to areas of poverty), social inclusive (where the emphasis is on achieving jobs as the escape from poverty) and the moral underclass (emphasising the moral and cultural roots of poverty). While the UK government's educational reforms, with city academies and privately-funded specialist schools, are reintroducing de facto selection – and by definition therefore, social exclusion – the Scottish executive continues to maintain and nurture, and reform, a comprehensive state system. Inclusion is, of course, one of the great "feel-good" terms of late 20th and early 21st century political correctness, particularly enjoyed by politicians because it can mean whatever the listener wishes it to mean. Perhaps the key test for the sincerity and clear-thinking of those using the term inclusion, is to probe them for their definition of social exclusion.

From a Scottish perspective, these discussions are entirely timely. Major initiatives on the development of appropriate vocational curricula are occurring. Voluntary moves, in schools in Moray and in Edinburgh as well as elsewhere, towards a more flexible approach to the age and stage at which standard grade exams are pursued are now being complemented by a more directive approach in the city of Glasgow. The Scottish Education Department's schools of ambition initiative aims at raising achievement and attainment in a cohort of schools across the country. Scotland should certainly have both good practice and hard experience to offer Europe. Without a doubt, Europe will offer Scotland alternative pathways and strategies as well as a wealth of insights and alternative cultural perspectives. EdGATE will seek to collect, share and develop good practice and to establish a catalogue of new models which can inform developments and thinking across Europe. Watch this space – for the good practice and for the debates around them. □

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## Key points

1 EdGATE is an EU-funded initiative to share good educational practice

2 High on its priorities is identifying how education can assist economic growth

3 Meaningful vocational courses which can engage students' interests are a priority across many of Europe's education systems

4 Social inclusion is a common goal but without consensus as to its meaning. There are major areas of debate and contention, even within the UK

5 Experiences vary enormously but key issues are common across Europe