

As an EU Member State, Ireland informs and is informed by decisions, agreements, policies, and priorities identified at EU level. Understanding how these agendas and decisions influence national priorities and planning can support the development of quality and the delivery of practice.

Introduction

Most of us, by now, are well aware of the impact of Brexit on our lives, the economy, and Northern Ireland. But are we clear on what we need to know about European policies, and why they are relevant to our education and training sector and to guidance service developments?

In the post-Brexit world of education, why is it important to understand and be aware of EU Commission policies and strategic objectives, and the importance of the European Union (EU) agenda of mobility as a crucial option for Irish students and education and training management and staff? Are we aware of how EU policies are directly affecting the work that we do?

There may be some misunderstanding about the role of the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) in guidance in Ireland and about our role in Europe and internationally. Hopefully what follows will clarify the vital links between EU Agendas across education, training and employment, and developments in guidance services in schools and further education and training (FET). Hopefully too it will clarify the need to have a national agency with a dedicated role to connect with what's happening in Europe, so as to inform national developments in guidance.

NCGE is an agency of the Department of Education, responsible for informing policy and supporting practice in guidance provision in lifelong learning and education. One key aim of NCGE is to contribute to 'the exchange of information on guidance counselling provision and practice with other guidance and employment services ... through the Euroguidance Centre, both in Ireland and in other Member States of the EU'.

Guidance (or *lifelong guidance*) is an umbrella term used internationally to refer to a great range of guidance-related activities: provision of career and education information, assessment, delivery of learning to support career development

Why Should We Be Aware of European Policies in Education and Guidance?

An introduction to current EU Agenda policies directly affecting national developments in education, training, and guidance sectors



Jennifer McKenzie

Director, National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)

competences, delivery of group and one-to-one guidance counselling, facilitating referral, and much more. Guidance also requires adherence to core principles of impartial, quality services delivered by appropriately qualified staff, in models to suit each target group.

When we reflect on Europe, we often think of finance and of legal matters for Member States, or more recently the EU response to the global pandemic. At EU level, each Member State is responsible for the competence areas of education and training. That is, each country determines its own education and training curriculum, delivery of compulsory education, school entry and leaving ages, and so on.

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However, the various EU polices aim to support Member States to collaborate, innovate, and share good practice in education and training. They aim to address shared challenges, to set objectives, and to find ways to measure progress and support cross-border and EU-wide cooperation.¹

Here we will consider four of these key EU policies – European Education Area, Digital Action Plan, European Pillar of Social Rights, and European Green Deal – and see how they are informing review or development of current national strategies.

European Education Area

This policy aims to foster cooperation between EU Member States to enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems. Six key areas have been outlined, each of which will ultimately inform national developments:²

- quality in education
- inclusion and gender equality
- green and digital transitions
- teachers and trainers: development and training for professional teachers, trainers, and educational staff, including international mobility of teachers and in teacher education to broaden access to and understanding of the diversity of quality teaching approaches to meet the needs of all pupils
- higher education
- geopolitical dimension.

Digital Action Plan

This policy initiative supports EU Member States' sustainable and effective adaptation of education and training systems to the digital age and provides a long-term strategic vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible European digital education.

Opportunities such as the digitalisation of teaching methods and pedagogies and the provision of infrastructure required for inclusive and resilient remote learning are currently being explored, along with the challenges

highlighted by students and adults affected by the digital divide. Ensuring accessibility for all to education and training options starts with access to appropriate IT equipment and adequate broadband, an issue highlighted across Ireland and the EU during the school and college closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.³

European Pillar of Social Rights

Most people are aware of the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. The UN is calling for global partnership to end poverty and develop global strategies to improve health and education and reduce inequality while tackling climate change and supporting economic growth.⁴

At EU level, these global goals are recast as the 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which aim at developing a Europe that is ‘fair, inclusive, and full of opportunity’. These 20 principles are clustered into three areas:

- equal opportunities and access to the labour market
- fair working conditions
- social protection and inclusion.

At the heart of these social rights is for people to have access to ‘quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market’.

Gender equality, social inclusion, supports to access employment, and so on are key aspects of guidance provision, ensuring that everyone has access to impartial information to support their own career decision-making. This work does not stop when someone leaves compulsory education!

Nor is it relevant only at the point of unemployment. Every adult transition – e.g., when childcare or family care is a priority, when disability or illness has affected work life, when upskilling for job prospects is required, when basic education or literacy issues are affecting career prospects – requires impartial information and guidance supports to make life- and career-changing decisions.⁵

European Green Deal

In July 2021 in Ireland, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 was signed into law.⁶ It states that Ireland ‘shall, so as to reduce the extent of further global warming, pursue and achieve, by no later than the end of the year 2050, the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable and climate neutral economy’ (section 5.3.1).

This legislation will lead to different and expanding opportunities in education, training, and employment across Ireland. It reflects the

“ Access to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning are at the heart of EU social rights.

European Green Deal,⁷ which aims to transform the EU into a modern, resource-efficient, and competitive economy, ensuring:

- no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050
- economic growth decoupled from resource use
- no person and no place left behind.

National developments

Also worth noting are the strategic developments or national reviews launched in 2021, which reflect interdepartmental approaches that have direct influence on citizens, society, and the economy. Each in some way incorporates and reflects the overarching policy agendas laid out by EU Agendas:

- Adult Literacy for Life⁸
- Consultation on the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education⁹
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021–2025¹⁰
- Joint Public Consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to 2030¹¹

EU Skills Agenda

Finally, the EU Skills Agenda outlines an EU-wide five-year plan, which incorporates the European Green Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights, to help people and businesses develop more and better skills to strengthen sustainable competitiveness, ensuring social fairness and ‘providing access to education, training and lifelong learning for everybody, everywhere in the EU’.¹²

“ There are opportunities to meet and exchange practice with colleagues across Europe, and create Europe-wide partnerships...”

The EU Skills Agenda aims to ensure that people have the ‘right skills for jobs’ and are ‘supported in their lifelong learning pathways’. Again, a key pillar is to ensure that people have access to quality impartial information¹³ and supports to make decisions about their education and career, by providing guidance services that ‘can help job-seekers, students, adult learners and others make well-informed decisions on skills, qualifications, opportunities to travel and study abroad, and career development’. Here, the EU Commission details the role of the European Euroguidance Network.¹⁴

In accordance with these overarching policies, and to achieve these various aims, the EU Commission confirmed in 2021 that the overall budget for Erasmus for 2021–2027 has been increased to over €26 billion:

Erasmus+ mobility has positive effects on educational, social, personal, and professional development, in that it enhances knowledge, skills and attitudes, improves employability, helps confidence-building and independence, stimulates curiosity and innovation, fosters the understanding of other people, and builds a sense of European belonging.¹⁵

It is crucial to understand that this funding is not just to support students to complete a year abroad during their undergraduate degree. Funding is

available to support higher education, vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (FET in Ireland), and early childhood education, while youth and sport groups can also apply for various versions of Erasmus+ grants. More information is available through the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) EURIreland resource¹⁶ and Léargas.¹⁷

For staff in the education and FET sectors, principals, subject teachers or tutors, coordinators, and guidance counsellors, there are opportunities to meet and exchange practice with colleagues across Europe, learn about new practices, and create Europe-wide partnerships for the development of education and training practices.

Bringing all this knowledge into practice

Maintaining NCGE's remit to engage in information exchanges with the EU Commission and colleagues across Europe, Euroguidance Ireland, hosted by NCGE, is part of the European Commission-funded Euroguidance Network of 64 centres across Europe, designated to promote and support the competence development of guidance practitioners.¹⁸

Euroguidance Ireland collaborates with colleagues in the post-primary and FET programmes to ensure an integrated approach to supporting the European dimension of guidance delivery. It does this by providing information for guidance practitioners on the various EU policies and resources to encourage students to consider all their learning and training opportunities across the EU.

Since 2017, NCGE has introduced the concept and processes of a Whole School Guidance Framework,¹⁹ which supports school managers and guidance counsellors to develop and deliver the guidance plan and guidance programme in collaboration with all school management and staff.

Within this framework, Euroguidance Ireland developed the Euro-Quest module²⁰ for Transition Year to support students to learn about the opportunities for learning and work and volunteering across Europe while developing their career research and decision-making skills. Ideally, students reflect on their career interests, language skills, and cultural issues and complete a project on how to pursue their chosen career with education and training in other EU countries. This will help them to make impartial, fully informed, life-changing decisions that are not based simply on, for example, needing fewer points to do dentistry in another country!

The competences that students need to develop now in addition to their subject or career specialisms include language skills, soft or transferrable skills, flexibility and adaptability, a global-citizen approach, and multicultural and anti-racist approaches. These are all the skills learned from living and learning or working abroad or engaging with exchange programmes with our EU neighbours.

It is not just students and young people who need to develop these skills. When was the last time you engaged with someone in Spain, Luxembourg, or Bulgaria in a similar career role to learn from their approach to teaching, or management, or guidance provision?

It is incumbent on those of us in policy development, education management, teaching and learning, and guidance service provision to be informed about how EU Agenda policies and priorities are directly affecting our national, regional, and local developments and practice. That way we too can contribute to a more fair and equitable society, enhancing quality education and gender equality, and providing impartial guidance to ensure access to equal opportunities and social inclusion. And maybe we can try to save the planet along the way.

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