



Committee 3 meetings

Durrës, 2 & 3 April 2009

Ref. Agenda: Educ. & Training 5
For Information

Original in English

AER Position on the European Commission's Green Paper on "Migration & Mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems"

Introduction

The Assembly of European Regions (AER) welcomes in principle the proposal of the European Commission to draw up a Communication on Migration and Mobility, and is supportive of the main approach set out in the current Green Paper.

The Assembly of European Regions (est.1985) is the largest independent network of regions in the wider Europe. Bringing together over 270 regions from 33 countries and 16 interregional organisations, AER's mission is to:

- Promote the principle of subsidiarity and regional democracy;
- Increase the regions' political influence within the European institutions;
- Support the regions in the process of European enlargement and globalisation;
- Facilitate interregional cooperation across wider Europe and beyond.

Our members have for years been very actively involved in the development and implementation of educational policies as well as in the development of initiatives to facilitate the integration of migrants into their respective societies. As an expression of this, we have set up a sub-committee on education and training that consists of politicians, experts and practitioners from our regional members. This sub-committee has not only co-operated with the Commission and Parliament on issues like the Comenius Regio Working Group, but has also served as an active knowledge exchange platform for our members.

Our dedication to Migration and Integration is reflected in AER's General Assembly 2008 (Tampere, Finland), which was entirely dedicated to the issue Migration, Education and Integration. The event brought together over 600 participants, who discussed policy approaches and exchanged innovative ideas on Education as a tool for integration.

We hope that the abovementioned overview of our activities serves as an indication of the experience which exists within the European community of regional governments with regard to Education and Integration. Based upon this experience, we would like to comment on the Green Paper "Migration and Mobility: challenges and opportunities for EU education systems."

AER position

The Assembly of European Regions welcomes the initiative by the European Commission to put Migration, Education and Integration high on the European agenda. The initiative pays tribute to the fact that Europe has transformed from a region of emigration to one of immigration. This can be traced back to both push and pull factors – the former being the difficult living conditions in the migrants' countries of origin and the latter being the prosperity experienced in Europe and the demographic change that endangers Europe's social market economies as well as its competitiveness in our globalised world. In the future, neither the number of people trying to come to Europe in search of a better life, nor the need in Europe for migrants are likely to abate. In other words, the question of integration of migrants will be one of the central future challenges for the European Union.

In order for migration to be beneficial to both parties involved – the migrants and the host society – integration policies have to be improved. The integration of migrants into society relies on comprehensive integration policies. This includes integration into the labour market, housing issues, health and social services, nationality/citizenship, respect for diversity and - above all education and language skills.

The Assembly of European Regions would like to stress that the very broad definition of migrant children adopted in the Green Paper, which does not distinguish between third-country nationals, citizens of another EU Member State or those subsequently becoming nationals of the host member state should be carefully reconsidered. In terms of political message, this is a very welcome gesture that pays tribute to the equality of migrants, regardless of origin. Furthermore, it is true that an overlap of policy approaches for these different groups is very likely. However, it has become a widely accepted fact that the ability of migrants depends largely on two underlying factors:

- The level of education of the migrants: generally speaking migrant children of parents with a low level of education are most disadvantaged with regard to performing well at school and being successfully integrated
- The economic background of the family: children of affluent families have a significantly better chance to be successful at school and to integrate into the society of the host country. In turn, migrant children of parents with a low salary and no savings, perform much weaker with regard to school-performance and level of integration.

In other words, the broad definition adopted in the Green Paper encompasses migrants that do not only have very distinct backgrounds and problems, but also very different means at their disposal to overcome these challenges. Therefore AER strongly encourages the EC to adopt a more nuanced definition that allows the development of tailor made initiatives and approaches to facilitate the integration of migrants.

The policy challenge

The challenge to provide good education to children from a migrant background derives from the fact that it has to take into account a number of aspects, some of which are not easily influenced by the educational system, since they are related to issues outside the realm of schools:



Firstly, the successful integration of migrant children is partly due to the respective family background. One challenge therefore is to design policies that do not only address migrant children themselves, but also include other family members.

Secondly, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which has been carried out in over 40 countries under the auspices of the OECD, has revealed that language proficiency is a prerequisite for integration. Overcoming the language barrier, therefore is one of the most important policy challenges.

Thirdly, residential segregation has created schools with very high numbers of children from a migrant background. PISA has shown that pupils who are in schools with a high concentration of migrants perform worse than those who are taught in classes with a high concentration of pupils from the host society, who are skilled in the host language and who have high educational aspirations. Furthermore, segregation endangers one of the central objectives of education, namely to create societal bonds between children of migrants and their peers and to build inclusive societies. Against this background, it is pivotal to design policies to counteract segregation.

Fourthly, children from a migrant background do have very different needs with respect to learning in general and in particular with respect to learning the language of the host country. A successful system that aims at the integration of migrants, therefore, needs to be comprehensive and flexible in order to adapt to the individual needs of the pupils.

Fifthly, the necessary flexibility and high quality of the programmes needed for successful integration require the provision of additional resources. A study by the Bertelsmann Foundation, reports that these additional resources, would be well allocated to the case of migrant integration, because well-educated and integrated migrants have a far greater opportunity to participate and enrich their host societies – socially, culturally and economically.

The policy response

The Assembly of European Regions congratulates the EU Commission for its comprehensive package of policies to address the challenges related to the integration of children from a migrant background. Based upon the experience from our members, we would like to make the following contributions:

From a general point of view and with regard to lifelong learning policies, the Assembly of European Regions would like to underline the necessity for continuity concerning support measures provided to migrant children in order to facilitate notably the transition between different education levels.

Firstly, we agree with the policy approach that focuses on the acquisition of the host language as a key to integration. As younger children, compared to their elders, tend to have a greater learning facility, it is important to offer children the opportunity to learn the language of the host society as early as possible. Preferably, language acquisition should begin at pre-school level (i.e. in kindergartens) and should accompany the regular education of migrant children throughout their school career. Since lowering the age of school enrolment would

present a considerable political effort, it could be more advisable to adapt and promote effective alternatives at pre-school level, for example intercultural kindergartens with specially trained kindergarten workers. These programmes and the methods applied there, however, need to be closely coordinated with those in the primary schools to ensure compatibility.

Throughout Europe, a number of different approaches have been adopted to promote language acquisition. The policies that have delivered the most encouraging results are those that combine immersion (the participation of migrants in the normal curriculum) with specialised additional courses that aim to improve the language ability of migrants. The most successful of these programmes exhibit the following characteristics:

- They are based upon systematic programmes that contain explicit standards.
- The curriculum, although determined and implemented on a local level, is embedded into centrally developed guidelines that give a framework for language development as well as benchmarks to monitor progress.
- The language programmes are time-intensive and are offered at various levels, including pre-school, primary and secondary school level.
- Teachers who are teaching migrants to learn the language of the host country have received specialist training to teach their mother tongue as an additional language.

Secondly, the Assembly of European Regions supports the idea of targeted approaches to counterbalance educational disadvantages through awarding scholarships. Furthermore, we would like to reiterate the importance of additional educational support through learning and homework classes as well as individual mentoring and tutoring of children with a migration background. These initiatives have proven to be most successful when designed and implemented in partnership with parents' organisations and community institutions.

Thirdly, the AER is supportive of any measure encouraging educational institutions to take their share in welcoming migrant children as a means to prevent residential segregation and to avoid imbalances among the said institutions.

Fourthly, the AER would like to underline that, upon enrolment, children with a migrant background usually have a linguistic disadvantage. Therefore, migrant children tend to perform worse in educational systems that are based on early selection. To overcome this deficit, educational systems should be based upon the idea of a second chance. A possible model of this system would be to postpone the selection stage regarding further education by creating orientation stages in secondary education. During this orientation phase, pupils from the primary school stay together for another one to two years, without having to go through the selection process.

Fifthly, the AER would like to point out the need to offer continuous learning. Observations of successful migrant children have illustrated that their way to success in most cases was a long one: often they started on lower levels and worked their way up step by step. In this context, the educational system should be organized in a way to ensure that it facilitates the professional ascension in a step-by-step way.

Sixthly, we would like to place particular emphasis on the fact that dual systems of qualified job training contribute to the reduction of drop-out rates and facilitate the transition from schools into the labour market. Therefore, we would like to recommend that more support is given to

the establishment of these types of program. For them to work successfully, schools and companies need to cooperate closely and an organized transitional arrangement needs to be in place.

The role of the European Union

Education is clearly the responsibility of national, regional and local actors and should continue to be so. It is on the national, regional and local levels that strategies need to be defined and implemented, and it is on these levels that the best knowledge about prerequisites and needs can be found. In times of increasingly mobile societies, however, it is important that the approaches and initiatives at the local level are embedded into a supportive European framework that is conducive for the exchange of best practices and the development of innovative educational policies.

In this context, it might be interesting to explore the options of using the Open Method of Coordination to further focus the policy effort through the development of indicators and benchmarks.

Conclusion

AER very much welcomes the Commission's wish to focus on Migration and Mobility. We hope that this will take place more consistently through national programmes, but also through a range of modalities that enable partnerships between Europe's institutions and regional authorities and their associations.

They are a potentially invaluable resource for sharing knowledge and expertise and in strengthening inclusive multicultural societies. The Assembly of European Regions and its members are keen to play a fuller role in future, in closer liaison with the Commission in relation to Migration and Integration. We urge the European institutions to help turn this enormous potential into reality on the ground.

Strasbourg, 19 November 2008
JS/DM

