

European and External Affairs Committee

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Meeting date: 27 September 2006

Meeting time: 9.00 to 12:05

Meeting venue: Committee Room 1 & 2, Senedd, Cardiff Bay

Title: Review of European and Global Citizenship Education

Information needs to be 'clear, objective, comprehensive, relevant and easy to find'

OECD : Citizens as partners, 2001

The statement in the box is simple and self evident. It was written in the context of an OECD study looking into ways of encouraging the participation of citizens in policy making at local, regional, national and international levels. While simple and self evident it is not necessarily easy to achieve. I have found it an inspiring principle in my activities as an information professional concerned with disseminating information about the European Union and the wider Europe to a broad section of the population in Wales and wider afield. It is a theme that I will return to throughout this paper.

In the context of citizens' engagement with the European Union the challenge of satisfying the principle is considerable. Thus, if it is said that information provided about the EU needs to be 'clear, objective, comprehensive, relevant and easy to find' where are we today?

European Union Information and Communication Policy

January 2006 saw the publication by the European Commission of a Communication on information and communication - the fourth in five years! This tells us something about how far concerns about information and communication have risen up the political agenda of the European Union and Member States - just how central information and communication issues have become in the debate about challenges facing the EU.

In the White Paper (as in earlier Communications) the European Commission restates the need to give citizens (including the young) the means to actively participate in the EU policy-making process and to feel 'ownership' of the 'European project'. In addition, the July 2006 Communication from the European Commission on 'European policies concerning youth participation and information' (COM (2006)417) says that the principle of involving young people in European affairs should be further reinforced.

Ever since the referendums in France and Denmark on the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 the information and communication policy of the European Union has been the focus of attention - as politicians and officials have come to see that citizens across Europe, to varying degrees, have little knowledge of

the EU, are not enthusiastic about the way they perceive the Union is developing, and have seemingly little interest in finding out more.

Opinion polls of attitudes amongst citizens to the EU and the results of the referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 have only heightened the efforts of the European Commission and the other EU Institutions and Member States to seek ways of 'closing the gap' between the Union and its citizens. In her blog in June 2005 European Commissioner for Information and Communication, Margot Wallström, said, decision makers must 'listen better, explain better and connect with citizens'.

Whether that gap between the EU and its citizens can be bridged simply by information and communication activities is open to question, but at least with the focus on this area a whole series of specific information and communication initiatives are being taken at a European level, many of which are to be welcomed as small steps to making the European Union a more open, transparent, accountable and professionally managed entity. Many of these small steps help European information professionals and euro-watchers, even if they have little impact on citizens' overall attitudes to the EU.

Positive developments

Access to documents' legislation (Regulation 1049/2001) has made possible access to many important EU documents which were previously hidden. While for some a rather dry principle, access to documents' legislation is all about allowing citizens to hold more accountable those who take decisions in their name by offering them comprehensive access to all primary data (a long established tradition in Finland and Sweden)

Such key areas as legislative and statistical information has become 'freely' accessible through the web in the last ten years: a true revolution in accessibility. Through EU Bookshop, over time all EU publications should become freely available.

Previously internal databases such as the Legislative Observatory / PreLex have been made available to the public to allow monitoring of the EU's policy making activities

The recognition and implementation of the principle that 'communication' is a two way process and that the EU Institutions need to listen and consult as much as disseminate information (Your Voice in Europe)

The recognition and gradual implementation of the fact that many citizens use radio and television as their main format for receiving information. The development of Europe by Satellite, financial support for EuroNews, development of a dedicated European Parliament web streaming TV channel, and the publication in 2006 of a EU report 'Is there a case for an EU information television station'.

The significant development of the EU's information on the web.

The recognition that providing information about the EU cannot be a massive centralised operation from 'Brussels', but that it must be 'local' using appropriate organisations, networks and agencies,

both public and commercial, at the national, regional, local and sectoral levels. The recent launch of the Europe Direct Information Centre network throughout the EU is an initiative by the European Commission to have a more visible presence throughout the regions to allow citizens find out about, debate and participate in EU activities. The five centres in Wales are being opened during 2006, the South Wales Europe Direct Information Centre being launched on the 28 September 2006 by the Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan, First Minister for Wales.

So, for those who need to follow what is happening in the European Union on a day by day and active basis, it is much easier today than it was five, ten, fifteen years ago.

However, there are still major challenges

Quotations from European Commissioner Margot Wallström and the veteran euro-watcher John Palmer illustrate the challenge:

Margot Wallström, 2005

... warning to all European politicians. We must close the gap between the people and the policymakers.

We need to start seeing the citizens as the centre of everything and the institutions as moving around them, receiving and responding to their messages.

...delivering on the key issues of the day: jobs for people - preserving peace in Europe - protecting the environment etc ... is also an essential ingredient of 'connecting' citizens to political institutions.

John Palmer, 2004

Frankly I do not believe there are any purely 'professional' or 'technical' solutions to the problems surrounding EU communications strategy. The fundamental reforms that are essential for any EU communications policy to succeed are essentially political.

European citizens need to feel a far greater sense of 'ownership' of the European political process.

Member States must accept shared responsibility with the EU institutions for both the content of the communications messages and the manner in which they are delivered.

These are perceptive comments that are not easy to achieve without major changes in the governance of Europe, and that go way beyond information and communication actions.

We may have the means in place to allow European citizens to become well informed about the EU and to become involved in policy making, the EU may have in place numerous ways of listening to the concerns of citizens and other stakeholders, the EU may be developing into being an open and transparent organisation: however, it is not an inevitable outcome that popular support for or

understanding of the EU will rise.

It is appropriate that these reforms are made because they may play their part in bringing the EU and its citizens together, but the EU being seen as a successful and productive means of improving people's lives will be the key factor in developing citizen support. With an ever larger and more diverse EU, and an EU where there is genuine ideological disagreement as to the way forward, that indeed will be a challenge

One can also mention, in passing, that it is not just the European Union that faces this challenge of democratic governance. Most governments at a national, regional and local level also face a similar situation. These challenges are addressed in the OECD report 'Citizens as partners. Information, consultation and public participation in policy-making' cited above. It says that in all developed countries waning public confidence in official institutions is forcing governments to listen more, become more transparent and, ultimately, be more accountable. The report concludes that if citizens are to have more say in policymaking, they must have access to information that is 'clear, objective, comprehensive, relevant, and easy to find'.

Clear, objective, comprehensive, relevant, and easy to find information

Despite the positive developments in the dissemination of EU information outlined above we are still some way from being in an optimal position for the young person (or other citizen in Wales) trying to find out about EU and the wider Europe.

Much of the primary information published by the EU itself is not aimed at the young citizen and even when this is the case, it is written in a bland 'Europeanese' that does little to engage interest. Inevitably, information published by the EU is not 'objective' – it is a 'committed actor' in a process and presents a certain perspective. One can equally say the same about information about the EU provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, indeed, the Welsh Assembly Government. There is no such thing as a single objective information source. The key is to provide the means, the information literacy skills and the desire to participate in public affairs that allows the young citizen to find out about European issues that interest them from a range of perspectives – and to give them a sense that their own perspective can play its part in the process.

That challenge is immense and I cannot pretend to have a ready made set of initiatives that will transform the situation. The paper presented in May 2006 to this Committee from the Council for Education in World Citizenship – Cymru (CEWC-Cymru) provides one set of initiatives. Another, is a series of conferences called 'The EU and all that: Citizenship Conference' to be organised by the Hansard Society and the UK Office of the European Parliament in 2006-07. One of these conferences is to be held in Cardiff on 21 March 2007.

Some other examples can be gleaned from the further reading sources listed below – in particular, I would highlight the inspiring article 'Not just child's play. EU citizenship for young people' in the August 2006 issue of European Information Service.

At the South Wales Europe Direct Information Centre we do have three initiatives that we hope to

implement which we feel will play a part in helping young people and others in Wales (and elsewhere) to engage with Europe.

The first is to create a database and website 'Wales and Europe', which will bring together the rather limited amount of information that has been published which deals specifically with the European Union from a specifically Welsh perspective. Through years of experience with students in the European Documentation Centre at Cardiff University working on projects on some aspect of the impact on the EU on Wales I have built up a substantial guide on the subject. With the launch of the SWEDIC in September 2006 one of our first priorities is to develop this guide into a free and publicly accessible website and develop its content. This will highlight information provided by the Welsh Assembly Government and this Committee, of course, but it will also highlight information from local authorities, professional bodies, research and academic organisations, commercial publishers, newspapers etc.

Secondly, we are working on proposals to allow Cardiff University to take over the publishing of European Sources Online (ESO), a major electronic information service allowing the user to find out information about the EU and the wider Europe in an easy to use, structured way. While no single information source or service can ever honestly claim to be a 'one-stop shop', nevertheless my aim as longstanding Executive Editor of ESO has been to implement the principle that information needs to be 'clear, objective, comprehensive, relevant and easy to find' in the context of finding out about the EU, the countries and regions of Europe and the issues that affect the citizens of Europe. This translates in practice to mean that:

- You can find information from a range of perspectives and levels
- You can find the information easily

Cardiff University wants to sustain this excellent as a central activity of the South Wales Europe Direct Information Centre and to make it freely available to the people of Wales through access in schools, colleges, libraries and other appropriate places. ESO does inevitably entail significant costs. For this reason it has been in discussion with the Welsh Assembly Government and this Committee.

Thirdly, SWEDIC has the technical facilities and staff expertise to be able to offer training to individuals and groups who want to learn how to find out about Europe in a professional, informal and friendly way.

While, it could not be naively claimed that the successful implementation of these three initiatives alone would transform young Welsh citizens' engagement with Europe, SWEDIC does believe that, alongside initiatives taken by others, they could become significant building blocks in achieving that objective.

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Further reading

European Commission

Communication from the Commission ... on European policies concerning youth participation and information. Follow-up to the White Paper on a New impetus for European Youth: Implementing the common objectives for participation by and information for young people in view of promoting their active European citizenship

COM (2006)417 (20.07.06) Text + Annex (SEC (2006)1006)

European Commission

White Paper on a European Communication Policy
COM(2006) 35 (01.02.06) Text

European Commission

Youth takes the floor. Young Europeans' concerns and expectations as to the development of the European Union
Standard Eurobarometer, No.65, 2005 Text

Gapp, Rachel

Not just child's play. EU citizenship for young people
European Information Service, No.272, August 2006 Text

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Citizens as partners. Information, consultation and public participation in policy making
OECD, 2001 Text

See also: OECD Website: Engaging citizens in policy making

Wilde, Stephanie (ed.)

Political and citizenship education: international perspectives
Symposium Books, 2005

ISBN: 1-873927-99-1

Ian Thomson

Ian Thomson is a European information specialist.

Whilst working as a researcher to a Member of the European Parliament, he created in 1980 European Access, which became the leading bibliographic service for European information in the 1980s and 1990s. Later, under his continuing editorship, an electronic version, European Access Plus, was launched, as was a new information service called KnowEurope. He is the author of the book 'The documentation of the European Communities' (Mansell, 1989). Winner of the European Special Librarian of the Year Award 1994 by the European Chapter of the Special Libraries Association.

Currently, he is the Manager of the European Documentation Centre, Cardiff University, and an Information Consultant to the business-oriented Wales Euro Info Centre. In 2006 Cardiff University won a contract from the European Commission to establish the South Wales Europe Direct Information Centre (SWEDIC) and Ian Thomson has become its Information Manager and Strategist. He is a member of the European Commission's Team Europe network.

In addition, he is Executive Editor of European Sources Online, a web-based European information service published by ProQuest Information and Learning until June 2006. Currently, negotiations are taking place to investigate whether Cardiff University should take over the publishing of ESO.

He is President of the European Information Association, the international professional organisation for those who work with European information.

He is currently joint-editing a book reviewing European Union information services in the UK to be published by Taylor and Francis in late 2006.

He directs and presents papers at a large number of training courses and conferences on European topics throughout the world, in the United States, Canada and Australia and in most European countries.

In July 2005, he took part in EU information training in Australia on behalf of the European Commission. Since then, he has also provided training in the UK, Croatia, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden. During the autumn of 2006 he will, in addition to his work at SWEDIC at Cardiff University, be presenting in Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Bulgaria, Spain and Greece.

He has regular teaching and training assignments at the European Training Institute, Brussels; College of Europe, Natolin, Poland, College of Europe, Bruges and the European Institute of Public

Administration, Maastricht, Luxembourg and Barcelona. In 2006 he was asked to present the EU module on a Masters Degree in Global Journalism for journalists from across the world at the University of Örebro, Sweden. This will be repeated in 2007. In the United Kingdom he has directed courses for ASLIB/IMI, the Circle of State Librarians and the Civil Service College, as well as for the European Information Association and SCOOP.

He has carried out consultancy work for the Wales European Centre, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and European Commission.