



West of Scotland Colleges' Partnership



European and External Relations Committee inquiry - EU 2020 Strategy Supplementary paper by the West of Scotland Colleges' Partnership

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Introduction

Since members of the Committee have, previously, been furnished with copies of the West of Scotland Colleges' Partnership's (WoSCoP) response to the European Commission's consultation, this paper is confined to addressing, in turn, the six issues that have been identified as being of particular interest to the Committee, viz.:

1. Our views on the Lisbon Strategy and on Scotland's performance against the Strategy's targets.
2. How the EU 2020 should address the failings of the Lisbon Strategy.
3. Our overall impression of the European Commission's consultation.
4. What we consider to be the key aspects of EU2020 for Scotland
5. How Scotland can make progress against the EU2020 objectives.
6. The support required from Government.

1. WoSCoP's views on the Lisbon Strategy and Scottish performance against its targets

The deep and enduring damage inflicted on Scotland, particularly former industrial communities, by the ravages of the 1980s recession(s) meant that the Lisbon Agenda of (re-) establishing sustainable growth and creating worthwhile jobs was always likely to pose greater challenges in this corner of Europe and in this part of the United Kingdom. The vision of 27 Member States transforming themselves into knowledge economies was and remains a one size fits all chimera: a narrow and short-term perspective that ignored the evolution of Member States' economic, social and industrial structures and their respective strengths and failed to adequately anticipate the impacts of demography, energy supply and climate change. This was compounded by a lack of a coherent cross-Commission strategy to ensure that all instruments at its disposal - in the form of transnational cooperation programmes and funding streams were deployed in concert to ensure a synergetic impact.

A specific illustration of this is the recruitment of significant numbers of Polish and Hungarian dentists and doctors by the Scottish, United Kingdom, Danish and Swedish governments through the use of third party agents, which not only enriches agents, but also fails to make best possible

use of Europe's own mechanisms for mobility within the European Higher Education Area. Having been involved in the creation of the European Higher Education Area and provided funding through the Erasmus programme, a self-evident and significantly less expensive "European" solution for the aforementioned national governments could have been achieved by them either engaging directly with Polish and Hungarian universities to invest in work placement, preparation and recruitment programmes to attract doctors and dentists to their respective countries or, at an earlier stage, taking action at a national level to increase the number of undergraduate programmes in these disciplines in their respective countries and, if necessary, recruiting students from Poland, Hungary and elsewhere to make up any shortfall.

Whilst economic and labour market forecasting remains notoriously difficult, one may have anticipated that one of the lessons of the financial crisis is that disproportionate focus and investment of resources in a single sector or limited range of industries would now be considered unwise. However, the concentration by many national governments and the European Commission on building up capacity in creative industries to sustain our economic futures seems all too similar to the blind faith displayed in banking and financial services in the 1990s and 2000s and is an obvious example of a uniform Europe-wide solution to a diverse and complex problem. Furthermore, it denigrates the importance of Europe's need to maintain and invest in strong manufacturing, agricultural and energy industries whilst maintaining effective and accountable public services. More prosaically, in fulfilling its role as the nation's main provider of initial and advanced vocational education the college sector can find itself charged with responding, immediately, to skills shortages that eventually emerge as short-term skills panics and subsequently, have to reshape its provision to support those whose employment or training in these skills shortage areas comes to a premature end.

For WoSCoP, these examples and myriad others demonstrate that any credible and effective strategy for growth and jobs must engage with the broadest possible range of views and interests and should also welcome criticism and reasoned doubt rather than seeking to impose harmony.

The investment of European Structural Funds, particularly the European Social Fund in supporting those furthest from the labour market, made an important contribution to securing progress towards greater social cohesion, the absence of rigorous and effective strategies for sustaining this progress presents a risk that progress will be arrested or, even worse, gradually reversed.

Whilst Scotland's performance against the Lisbon Strategy's targets may be deemed not to match those presented in the National Reform Programmes of EU Member States or data gathered from regions of comparable size and development, the direction of travel has been consistent with making effective progress but, in common with all EU27 Member States and regions, the financial crisis has been a significant brake on continuing progress. However, it does afford an opportunity for a critical re-assessment of the Lisbon Agenda, its relevance and the utility and effectiveness of the instruments available to the Commission, Member States and regions during its implementation. Although critical of some aspects of the Lisbon Strategy, WoSCoP acknowledges the incentives that a European policy embracing equality and sustainability has had on Scotland and the advances that it has fostered in these areas.

2. How the EU 2020 should address the failings of the Lisbon Strategy

WoSCoP welcomes the commitment to equity and fairness in the proposed EU 2020 Strategy and hopes that European level interest and policy intervention in these issues may serve to balance the self-serving corporate interests that have, consistently, blocked efforts at creating a climate of corporate social responsibility in some parts of Europe.

Aspirations for a fairer society articulated in the Commission's consultation on the EU 2020 Strategy are welcomed but this aspiration needs to be translated into a policy driver and any initiatives that the Strategy proposes should, as has emerged for environmental concerns, be subjected to some form of impact assessment on fairness. In a similar vein, respect for the diversity of Europe's regional diversity should mean that the pursuit of greater social cohesion should not be misinterpreted as a quest for uniformity an uninformed conformity.

It is axiomatic that a relevant EU 2020 Strategy should be capable of respecting and accommodating the diversity of the European Union. However, the conformist dynamic of the Lisbon Strategy suggests that respect for Europe's diversity needs to be clearly articulated. The increased prominence and importance assigned to the European Parliament as a consequence of the Lisbon Treaty, certainly, provides a mechanism for deeper scrutiny of the European Commission and its activities but, in the case of the EU 2020 Strategy, this should be extended to ensure broader multi-lateral accountability that is based on better engagement between the Commission and Members States, devolved and regional governments and other relevant stakeholders: a small observation on the latter is that fresh perspective may be injected into the EU 2020 Strategy if the Commission refreshed, deepened and extended the body of "experts" which it consults in reaching conclusions and forming opinions.

The Lisbon Strategy adopted a narrow definition of innovation as being purely scientific and technological research. This had the (unintended) consequence of overlooking more pragmatic examples of inventiveness and knowledge transfer in other domains that demonstrate, clearly, that innovation arises and impacts in practical settings. Consequently, WoSCoP supports the views expressed by other respondents to the Commission's consultation that the definitions of innovation and creativity to be applied in the EU 2020 Strategy need to be extended and more grounded.

Finally, the EU 2020 Strategy must make smarter use of existing EU infrastructure and instruments linked to academic and labour mobility in order to anticipate and address the impacts of the EU's demography.

3. Our overall impression of the European Commission's consultation

The approach to the consultation is as expected but its timing, covering the festive period, may have limited the quantity and quality of responses that have been submitted. The calendar for consultation is understandable in the context of the appointment of the new Commission. However, WoSCoP hopes that further consideration of the Strategy, by the European Commission and the European Parliament, will open up further opportunities for more robust debate.

4. What we consider to be the key aspects of EU2020 for Scotland

Given the degree of commonality between the Scottish Government's aspirations for a smarter, safer, healthier, fairer and greener Scotland that welcomes migrants and other "*Scots by choice*" and the imperatives of the EU 2020 Strategy, it is self-evident that all aspects of the Strategy are relevant for Scotland. The challenge will be to ensure that Scotland not only responds, positively, to the Strategy but that it also contributes to and shapes its evolution and implementation. With this in mind, WoSCoP contends that the key aspects for Scotland should be in forming alliances and making representations to promote the case for a partnership approach to implementing and monitoring the Strategy, arguing for transparent and proportionate development and implementation procedures and being vigilant that resources are better managed.

5. How Scotland can make progress against the EU2020 objectives

Scotland's can undertake a number of things to protect its interests and to create the conditions for making progress against the EU 2020 objectives. The first of these is, via all of the channels open to it – for example, MEPs, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, etc. - to argue that a place-based approach to the EU 2020 Strategy, that gives due prominence to devolved and regional governments, is not only the most pragmatic approach but is consistent with the principle of subsidiarity. In addition to this, Scotland should consider the merits of pressing for the extension of the principle of territorial cooperation to permit the consideration of more imaginative transnational programmes and programmes predicated on thematic orientations of interest and not only geographical proximity. Thirdly, the creation of a distinct Scottish bureau focused on identifying and exploiting policy, programme and funding synergies across the entire EU 2020 terrain could, if populated with the relevant competences aligned with real credibility across the range of relevant stakeholders, create and sustain a coherent and more dynamic Scottish approach to impacting on and benefitting from the Strategy.

6. The support required from Government

The single most significant form of support required from the Scottish Government is informed and inspirational leadership of a Team Scotland approach to the EU 2020 Strategy. Hand in hand with this, WoSCoP would like to see a reduction in the number of separate intermediary bodies involved in promotion, management and administration of EU resources in Scotland: hence the WoSCoP proposal for a competent one-stop bureau. Such a de-layering and simplification in the administration, management and promotion of European issues would almost certainly reduce the pointless displacement of resources from direct strategic intervention.