



Good Practice Makes Perfect: Considering the Purpose and Value of the Employability Learning Network Peer Review in Glasgow (Scotland), 11-12 April 2011

The Scottish Government hosted a Peer Review in Glasgow in April 2011 as part of the Mutual Learning Programme. The event brought together ministry officials and independent experts from eight countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain and Turkey), as well as representatives from DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission.

The purpose of the Employability Learning Network (ELN), which was presented by the Host Country, is to promote the sharing of experiences and good practices across local areas, providing practical guides and toolkits and keeping network participants up to date with a fast-moving policy context. Although it has only been in place since the autumn of 2009, the ELN has developed well over a short period of time and has received positive feedback from its users.

The key findings from the discussions at the event were as follows:

Employability is a cross-cutting issue. In order for multi-agency partnerships to be effective in addressing the employability agenda, the partners involved need to have a common understanding of the term 'employability'. This definition of 'employability' should recognise that it is a cross-cutting issue, which needs an integrated approach to supporting the target group. It is also important to recognise that the concept of 'employability' goes beyond the process of finding work and extends into the idea of maintaining and progressing in a job. Local employment partnerships should therefore include representatives of the Public Employment Service (PES), health and social services, the education and training sector, the third sector, the local authority, employers, beneficiaries themselves and any other relevant agency involved in local economic and employment development.

It is important to identify and respond to the needs of the locality and its target groups. The process of partnership-working should be client-focused, with a commitment to identifying and addressing the needs of the individual, rather than focusing on what support services the partner institutions can supply. The creation of a pathway or 'continuum', which maps out the range of supports an individual might need in making the transition to employment, enables partner organisations to identify what services they can provide at different points along the continuum. It is also important for partners to work together to identify and respond to the specific needs and context of the locality in which they are working. Ideally there should be a devolved responsibility for the procurement of services, in order for this process to enable local solutions to be found to local needs.

A national strategy or 'champion' should be complemented by local delivery and commitment. In order for partners to be engaged in collaboration at local level, it is important that there is a commitment to the partnership-working approach at national level, either in a national strategy, or through a national 'champion'. Furthermore, cross-departmental working at national level (e.g. across ministries responsible for employment, education, health and housing) is important to encourage a move away from 'silo-working' (e.g. when different institutions that share aims are working in isolation). Another important aspect of ensuring buy-in at local level and commitment to making partnerships work, is the need to show the 'business case' of working together by outlining what the benefits and cost savings might be, or perhaps more importantly, what the costs might be if partnership-working does not take place.

Partnership-working takes time. At both national and regional/local level, there may not be a culture of partnership-working and this requires time and effort on the part of all involved to develop. It can take time to move from an 'everyone for themselves' approach to the idea of



working together to achieve common aims. It is therefore important to allow for development time and to build up capacity, for example by sharing ideas of 'what works' for existing partnerships.

Mutual learning can help to avoid 're-inventing the wheel'. The focus should not necessarily be on sharing good practice but on sharing 'learning', since it is also possible to learn from unsuccessful practice. Bottom-up contributions to a 'bank of learning' are important and by stimulating 'regional competition' – e.g. creating a bank of case studies for each region of the country - it is possible to ensure that all members of the network contribute. Evaluation is important to identify good and best practice but should not be used as a disincentive to taking forward measures which have not yet been 'proven' by an external review.

Practitioners and employers need to be engaged in the employability agenda. It is important that front-line staff members are also given the opportunity to contribute to the employability agenda, for example to give their feedback on how a new policy is working in practice on the ground through practitioner fora. Employers can be engaged through services and incentives such as support with recruitment, subsidies for recruiting certain target groups, etc. An innovative example from the Glasgow Commonwealth Games also showed how procurement can be used to engage employers in contributing to the community, through a 'Community Benefit' clause.

Web-based services and toolkits are a cost-effective way of reaching out to target audiences: As demonstrated by the ELN website, it is clear that an online resource can be used to provide an easily accessible repository of good practice. However, there is more work to be done to exploit the potential of interactive online discussion fora, which to date show low levels of take-up. For practitioners from sectors such as health, housing and education, who may not see themselves as part of the employability continuum, toolkits were shown to be an effective method of giving them the knowledge, skills and moreover the confidence to take forward their new role.

Further reports from the Peer Review will be published on the Mutual Learning Programme website (<http://www.mutual-learning-employment.net/>).