

WALES YOUTH AGENCY

**“PRACTICAL CO-OPERATION TO PROMOTE THE SUCCESSFUL
TRANSITION OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM SCHOOL TO ADULT AND
WORKING LIFE”**

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DISTRICT APPROACH

During this presentation I intend to deal with the project undertaken by seven European partners to explore the potential of a district approach to education disadvantage. I will sketch briefly the background to the project, the issues identified by the partners, and the conclusions reached as to the best approach to be adopted in dealing with those issues. I will conclude with short references to the particular approach being adopted in my own national and local situation in Ireland and to future work that might be put in hand at a European level. This latter aspect will be dealt with in more detail by other speakers at a later stage in this conference.

BACKGROUND

The outcome of the Snekkerston Conference organised by the Danish government included a recommendation for “the establishment of 'model regions' which make a systematic comprehensive effort -with a view to involving all young people in working and social life.” Arising from this six partner agencies - with previous links through a variety of EU programme networks - which had been concerned at their own local levels with problems relating to the retention within mainstream education systems of young people at risk of early school leaving, formulated a project proposal to prepare a synthesis report based on case studies of their various districts. The proposal was approved by the European Commission Task Force on Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth (now DGXXI 1) and was undertaken with considerable support and assistance from the PETRA Youth Bureau.

The districts in the project were located in various geographical contexts and the partners leading the project at the different local levels come from a variety of backgrounds. The areas involved were;

i) Coimbra: Portugal

Coimbra which comprises a number of municipalities with a total population of some 120,000. A major source of employment is the textile industry (30%) which has a predominance of female labour and is currently undergoing a recession. The coordinating body is HAP - (The Technical, Artistic and Professional Institute of Coimbra) a centre for professional training and education.

ii) Cologne: Germany

Cologne is one of the major cities in Germany with a population of 360,000. It has a large manufacturing base but faces issues relating to the integration of immigrants and youth unemployment. The major influence in bringing forward projects for collaborative working has been Regionale Arbeitsstelle for Auslandsfragen (RAA).

iii) Cork; Ireland

The city of Cork with a population of 140,000 is the second largest city in Ireland and although surrounded by extremely fertile agricultural land and sustaining a wide variety of industries and services nonetheless has a number of pockets of high unemployment and social deprivation. The City of Cork Vocational Education Committee, a local authority with responsibility for a number of aspects of education and vocational training, undertook exploratory work on establishing a framework for supporting young people at risk.

iv) Fife; Scotland

The Region of Fife in Scotland has a population of 350,000 and was originally a major coal mining area. It has the highest level of unemployment in Scotland with some pockets of particular deprivation. The local education authority, Fife Regional Council, has undertaken work in schools to assist young people in maximising benefits both to themselves and society.

(v) South. - Rhone District: France

The project is based in an area south-west of the city of Lyons and encompasses the district of Givors with some 40,000 inhabitants. Initially a prosperous manufacturing area, the economy has been characterised by a decline in the traditional industries of glass and metal, Co-operative work in creating and offering employment has been undertaken for some time and the current project has been co-ordinated through the Academy of Lyons,

(vi) West Valley Region: Spain

The West-Voiles Region lies beside Barcelona and has a total population of approximately 675,000 persons, Important industries in the locality are textiles, construction, chemical products, and metallurgy. The change in economic conditions has led to more part-time, short-term employment with consequent problems for young people. Activities to research and relieve these problems have emanated from the ICE of Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. There is a working relationship between the ICE and the Valles Occidental County Council which includes 23 municipal areas and co-ordinates operations at district level

Following the inception of the project, the partners agreed that Leipzig be added in view of its previously existing collaboration with Cologne in similar work, Leipzig with a population of approximately 500,000 has been subject to major economic and social change since the collapse of the German Democratic Republic. The local RAA, in partnership with Cologne has undertaken parallel co-ordinating work with agencies and institutions involved with young people in four planned "innovation centres" within Leipzig.

THE ISSUES

At first glance the problems being encountered and dealt with by the partners may appear to have varied in detail from district to district, In addition, the organisational structures in place in the different districts varied greatly. Notwithstanding these and other differences, it was established at an early stage that the core issues facing both young people and the different education and training systems had much in common across all the districts.

The following were among the particular issues identified

- the speed of change both in employment structures and in social organisation generally
- the vulnerability in training and employment terms with the consequent social implications for young people with inadequate educational experience and achievement.
- the perception by many young people of the lack of relevance to their personal situations and aspirations of existing education provision
- the early establishment of perceptions of low self-esteem
- the lack of correlation between training programmes and employment opportunities
- the lack of coherence, both horizontal and vertical, between and within agencies charged with responsibility for various aspects of the development and welfare of young people.

Accessibility for all and especially for young people to quality education and training was identified as a key factor in minimising the potential for social exclusion and in helping to eliminate any tendency towards dualism in society. The need to provide conditions wherein the value of learning is widely accepted was seen to be significant in a society in which lifelong learning will be a feature and in which economic and social progress will be dependent on access to continuing learning opportunities in education and training being readily available, However, it was also recognised and acknowledged that, while social cohesion could not be secured without the involvement of education, neither would education alone - irrespective of accessibility and quality - be sufficient to secure that cohesion.

Likewise, while employment - within the framework of work as organised at present or as it might manifest itself in the future - is and will continue to be a significant and important feature of our social and economic structure, even if it were possible to bring about a situation of full employment that would not be sufficient in itself to achieve social stability.

The overall context in which the problems to be faced by young people can be resolved must be one of citizenship. The conditions in which they live must be such as to which enable them to achieve active participative citizenship. They must be enabled to live in a society in which they will feel they belong; in which they are comfortable and at ease with the other members of that society and, just as importantly, with themselves.

The project partners did not consider it would be an adequate or satisfactory response to focus specifically on young people to assist them in relating to society at large. The necessity of an education or training base and the importance of employment has already been stressed,

However, it was considered that it would also be necessary to influence the wider conditions within which young people are accepted and given status within their communities. While young people must be assisted so that they can articulate with the accepted modes and norms of society, this cannot be just a one-way street. It is not sufficient that society can simply expect young people to fit in. The process of social development is a dynamic one. Society must continue to examine and refine its values, behaviour and example to ensure that the process of inclusion of young people is not dependent on qualities and attributes which they will not be able to attain.

THE APPROACH

All of the partners were agreed on the main objectives of their projects as being:

- Identifying the reasons for young people failing to attain maximum benefit from the school system.
- The identification of the main actors in any locality in relation to the social, educational and economic systems.
- The collaboration and co-operation of all relevant social agencies in programmes of support,
- That those young people who are having most difficulty will be supported and followed in their education, training and work routes.
- That involvement of the community is an important factor in the success of any initiatives.
- The creation of innovative transitional projects to allow young people to integrate into their communities.
- Creating dialogue between teachers, lecturers and other agencies and representatives of the surrounding community.
- Assisting schools in the development and implementation of innovative curricular approaches and teaching methodologies to more fully address the diverse needs of all young people.
- Providing young people with realistic goals and assisting them in the acquisition of appropriate work and study methods,
- Making recommendations to appropriate authorities on the provision of training programmes and support networks.
- Achieving closer links between the education system and the economic infrastructure and putting particular emphasis on the school work transition area,
- Improving the educational attainments of all young people.

In attaining these objectives there were crucial elements which were seen to be basic to any project;

- (i) The need for a catalyst with access to agency structures.
- (ii) The need for political and official commitment to the approach.
- (iii) The provision of a forum whereby ideas could be shared and concerns aired.
- (iv) The need to involve the main actors in the localities. Included in these may be:
 - Education Authorities
 - Schools
 - Parents
 - Training Centre and Agencies
 - Youth Services
 - Community Organisations including churches
 - Trade Unions
 - Employment Services
 - Guidance Services
 - Further and Higher Education Establishments
 - Social Services
 - Local Authorities
 - Employer's Organisations
 - Police and other juvenile justice agencies and services

As the organisation of and responsibility for education and related activity and the range of other public and community agencies in contact with young people varied from district to district, the specific methods used by each partner district to achieve its aims showed corresponding variation to take account of particular local circumstances. There are representatives here from each of the partner districts and they will be available during the group sessions to elaborate on the arrangements in their own districts and to clarify any questions which other conference participants may wish to raise.

THE CORK APPROACH

Ireland has the highest youth population (42.4%) in the European Union and also one of the highest youth unemployment rates (27.7%) within the European Union. There has also been a significant increase in recent years in the numbers of young people classified as long-term unemployed.

The national picture is reflected in Cork and the incidence of disadvantage is concentrated in certain parts of the city, especially in areas with a high proportion of public housing.

Unemployment in Cork was only 5% in 1971 but with the decline of traditional industries, especially in automobile assembly, textiles and ship-building, this has risen to 22.8% in 1994. However, in some areas of concentrated disadvantage this rate can reach on an extensive basis to levels of the order of 35 - 50%,

All research - local, national and international has highlighted the close correlation between educational qualifications, employment and social class. It is clear that any long-term solutions to the problems of social exclusion, and marginalisation can be put in place only if they include strategies for maximising the retention of young people in general education until the age of 17/18 followed by entry to higher education or to further vocationally-oriented education and training. Care must also be taken that those who may leave school at an earlier stage are offered training interventions which lead to credible and worthwhile qualifications.

The Cork case study described the many interventions at present in place and the various actors involved. Some of the interventions are school-based, others are education-based but out-of-school, while others still relate to services which are not directly involved in the education process as is the case of many of the partner districts. While there has been a considerable degree of inter-agency co-ordination in place in the case of a number of these, there has been no overall framework in which the various interventions can be integrated in a way which would secure maximum cohesion between them.

Cork shared the view of Coimbra that strict collaboration between hitherto independent bodies is required for an effective response to the problems, The approach proposed within the Cork case study is for a formalised framework at local level within which an integrated strategy is agreed by the different interests involved with the implementation of that strategy implying the submerging to some extent at least within the formalised framework of the individual autonomies of the various agencies and organisations.

This proposed approach to these matters has been greatly facilitated by the adoption within the Community Support Framework, in agreement with the Commission of the European Commission, of the Local Urban and Rural Development Operational Programme. This contains a sub-programme which provides for the integrated development of designated disadvantaged areas, Cork City is one of more than thirty districts country-wide which has been designated for this purpose and an Area Partnership Company has been established to prepare and implement an action plan to deal with the problems of social exclusion in Cork. The Cork City partnership Company is comprised of representatives of local communities, social partners and public agencies.

It has as its main task the preparation and implementation of an area action plan which includes education and training strategies as key elements. These cover both preventive measures aimed at maintaining and sustaining young people in an inclusive mainstream education System and compensatory and remedial measures targeted at those who have already left education and who are at risk of exclusion because of inadequate educational experience or unsatisfactory qualifications. It should provide an ideal mechanism for the implementation of comprehensive strategies for the transition of young people through an integrated multi-agency approach at district level as it is intended that the different concerns of the many individual interest groups and agencies will be subsumed in the action plan to be established by the Cork City Partnership.

FUTURE WORK

In final section of the project report you will find suggestions of areas of further work which could be developed within an expanded network of districts committed to a "bottom-up" approach albeit co-ordinated at local level and operating within, overall policy frameworks at member-state and EU levels. These will be the subject of discussion during the Wednesday morning session of the Conference and there is no point in developing them at this stage

In concluding, I would like to commend the synthesis report to you and to thank the other partners in the project for their collaboration. I would also like on behalf of the project partners to acknowledge once again the help and support we received from staff of DGXXI1 and of the PETRA Youth Bureau and in particular from Alice Fracchia and Allan Mercer.