

Co-operation in Education

The 1997 Joint Declaration on relations between Australia and the EU stated that we should “promote dialogue aimed at strengthening our mutual cooperation in the fields of education and training ...” Since that time there have been two roundtables on this topic and many, if not most, Australian tertiary institutions have expanded their links with European Universities and colleges. In 2001 the Australian Government and the European Commission agreed to make funds available for a Pilot Project encompassing a joint Post Graduate program incorporating student exchange. The total amount of funding is close to \$A1 million over the 3 year life span of the project. In 2003, a similar amount of funding for a second Pilot Project was agreed and it is hoped that a similar project can be instituted with New Zealand.

These two pilot projects will provide a basis for Australian Institutions to take part in the European Commission's latest education initiative, Erasmus Mundus, which builds on the general objective that the European Community should pursue co-operation with third countries in the field of higher education in order “to prepare its citizens and its workforce for a global environment by including the international dimension in an appropriate and effective way”. Erasmus Mundus aims to create over 250 European Masters Courses spanning several Member States with the possibility of partnership with third countries such as Australia and New Zealand. The scheme will provide scholarships for students, academics and administrators.

Europe, Australia and New Zealand share a common vision in the fields of Education and Training in that they agree that a “highly trained and educated citizenry is a country's most precious possession”. Higher education is seen to play a critical role in boosting innovation, economic growth, employment growth and productivity.

In the European Union, Education and Vocational Training is a Member State competency but the Treaty on European Union, as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam, requires that the “Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting their cultural and linguistic diversity as regards the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems”(Article 149).

Community action is aimed at developing the European dimension in Education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States; encouraging mobility of students and teachers and encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between educational establishments; developing exchanges of information; encouraging youth exchanges; encouraging development of distance education; and fostering cooperation with third countries.

Community action in the field of Vocational Training aims to facilitate adaptation to industrial changes, improve initial and continuing vocational training to facilitate the reintegration of various groups into the labour market; stimulate cooperation between education establishments and firms and develop exchanges of information and experience as well as fostering cooperation with third countries.

Several initiatives have now been established in both fields. **Erasmus** is the flagship programme for student exchange and has just celebrated 1 million student exchanges since its commencement in 1987.

The **Leonardo da Vinci** program, established by Council decision in December 1994, is the European Community's program for Vocational Training. Between 1995 and 1999 it supported over 3, 000 projects involving nearly 60, 000 partners, with a total investment of 730 million, and encouraged the mobility of 130,000 people, the majority young people, with a view to enhancing their employability. The second phase is now under way with a budget of €1, 150 million.

Believing that every European citizen should be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in the information society, the Commission adopted the **e-Learning Action Plan** in 2001 which will aim to ensure all schools are connected to the internet, school curricula are adapted accordingly and teachers trained to use digital technologies.

Since 1997, the **Netd@ys initiative** has been promoting closer international co-operation in schools and Australia has been an active participant in this program in recent years.

For further information, see http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/index_en.html

July 2003