JOANNA LE METAIS

EDUCATION REFORM IN EUROPE

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1. CHANGING PRIORITIES

The end of the 20th Century has seen education rise to the top of the political agenda in developed and developing countries alike; education is a preferred route to solving economic and social problems. However, whilst there are many similarities in the perceived needs and even in the terminology used to identify the solutions, the purpose and approaches adopted differ according to national context and heritage. It is interesting to note the increase in the rate and scale of reforms, which have been, or are being, introduced to enable nations and individuals to meet the challenges of the 21st century. For example, in England, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain there has been a trend towards the devolution of responsibility to school level and, in some cases, the introduction of a consumerist approach to education by means of parental choice between schools. This has been accompanied by regulation through curriculum and assessment frameworks and prescribed classroom practice, for example, to speed up the achievement of qualifications targets or organisational restructuring. In some cases, governments have set targets for student participation and achievement. Whilst such regulation might serve the functions of securing minimum entitlement and safeguarding national cohesion, it does not necessarily lead to higher standards of performance and might also be seen as undermining institutional autonomy.

This chapter explores the aims and school-based provision of secondary education in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It should be noted that for two of these countries (namely Belgium and the United Kingdom), separate legislation and provisions apply in the constituent communities (Dutch, French and German-speaking) or nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) respectively. For convenience, this chapter describes those relating to Flemish-Speaking Belgium (Belgium FS) and England. Further information on the other constituent communities and nations, and for the twelve countries which joined the EU on 1 May 2004 (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) may be found on EURYBASE at www.eurydice.org.

This is followed by a brief consideration of the cross-national aims that have been identified by European Union as a whole, and strategies used to achieve them.
This section summarises current policies for the provision of secondary education, under eight headings:

- definition of secondary education
- overall aims
- purposes and priorities
- participation and engagement
- structure and organisation
- curriculum
- new approaches to teaching and learning
- assessment and certification.

2.1. Definition of Secondary Education

Secondary education caters for students aged from 10/12 to 18/19, and covers levels 2 and 3 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) scale (see Figure 7.1).

Compulsory full-time education ends in the year in which students reach the age of 15 (indicated as age 14 in Figure 1: Austria, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Portugal) or 16 (indicated as age 15 in Figure 1: Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden). Part-time education is required beyond this age in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands.

Public sector secondary education is generally free, but in Italy and the Netherlands fees are charged to those above compulsory school age; however, parents whose income falls below a specified amount may apply for a reduction or remission of the fees.

2.2. Aims

Educational aims reflect national aspirations and those expressed in government documentation may be grouped into five main areas, as follows:

- individual/personal: to promote the aesthetic, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, social and spiritual development of the individual in preparation for adult and working life and—albeit less explicitly stated—leisure
- economic: to prepare young people for (self-)employment, in order to enhance national productivity, particularly in relation to European or international competitors
- social and cultural: to provide inclusive and fair opportunities for all, recognizing cultural, racial and linguistic diversities in society; to transmit national values and to help young people understand and actively practise the principles of democratic citizenship
- knowledge, skills, standards: to raise standards of knowledge, skills and understanding, in particular with reference to literacy, numeracy and information and communication technologies and to help young people develop creative and problem solving approaches and inter- and intra-personal skills
- extending learning: to foster the skills and dispositions for learning, thereby raising participation in post-compulsory education and preparing young people for lifelong learning.