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Subject Answer on Public consultation on experts groups
Content



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ETUCE response to European Ombudsman's public consultation concerning the composition of European Commission expert groups

07 July, 2014

ETUCE represents 129 teacher trade unions in Europe and is a European level social partner on education and training. We are the voice of 11 million teachers representing them in numerous permanent working groups of the European Commission.

Our answers to the questionnaire of the Ombudsman on Commission's experts groups are based on our experience with DG EAC.

Q1. Which specific Commission expert groups do you consider to lack a balanced representation of relevant areas of expertise and interest in their membership? What, according to you, is the root cause of the unbalanced composition of the Commission expert groups identified by you?

The ad-hoc high-level groups established by DG EAC involve experts who seem not related to civil-society organisations or to social partners, but rather businesses and private organisations. These groups are established without any transparency, and when the ETUCE asked for membership in the expert groups, based on our expertise on the topics, DG EAC refused the access.

Examples:

High-level Group on Literacy (2011-2012) ended with this report:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf

High-level Group on Higher Education (2012-2013) produced this:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf

High-level Group on Education is also an interesting group: apparently, national "high-level experts/officials" are members, and it takes decisions on major education policy. The Advisory Committee for VET of the European Commission, which is a tripartite body with mandate since 1963, many times receives information on decisions this high-level group is about to take, and the results of discussions of ACVT are taken to this high-level group for decision. It is unclear when and what aims this group was established with, and who exactly are the invitees. We asked membership for ETUCE, or at least an observer status to the group, but it was said that only "high-level experts of the member states" are allowed to participate.

DGVT, DG Higher Education and *DG Schools* were established as informal groups for national directorate-generals of ministries of education. As ETUCE is a European Sectoral Social Dialogue partner on education and training, we requested many times to have at least an observer role in these groups,

particularly in the two latest ones wherein no trade unions are represented. The answer was that governments do not like to see social partners in these kind of meetings. However, it is strange, that DGVT involves four European-level social partner organisations (ETUC, BusinessEurope, UAEPME, CEEP) working on VET issues, but the two other DG meetings cannot have any social partners' representatives from European Sectoral Social Dialogue for Education.

DG EAC was running the *Lifelong Learning Programme Committee*, which is now called *Erasmus+ Committee*. This committee discusses about setting up the budget and calls for each year of the Erasmus+ programme. While European-level social partners could be observers in the LLP Committee, we were closed out from the Erasmus+ Committee. This has an influence on the calls under the programme as European-level social partners are hardly eligible to apply to the calls under Erasmus+. We originally asked full membership in the committee, but we were informed that this is a "technical group of the ministries of education", who do not want to see social partners in the meetings.

ETUCE has been a member in each *DG EAC thematic clusters*, later called *Open Method of Consultation working groups*, and now called *ET2020 working groups*. We had to lobby hard in order to keep our seats for the new period of the working groups 2014-2016, despite of the active work of our experts in the groups, because the "governments did not want to see the social partners and civil society" in these groups – according to the Commission.

Concerning the *OMC group on Language learning*, running between 2010-2013, we officially nominated an expert to this group but we never received an invitation despite the fact that we asked it many times.

2. The Commission's horizontal rules on expert groups allow for the Commission to appoint individual experts in their personal capacity. In your experience, does this possibility give rise to concern in terms of the balanced composition of expert groups and/or conflicts of interest?

We believe that this can be the case. We do not understand how DG EAC chooses experts to these high-level groups, and on which expertise the selection is made.

3. Do you consider that the current level of transparency regarding the composition of Commission expert groups, in particular through the Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities, is sufficient? In particular, does the information made available by the Commission allow you to ascertain which interests are represented by the members of Commission expert groups? If not, where do you see room for improvement? Do you consider that the current level of transparency regarding the work of expert groups, in particular through the publication of agendas and minutes, is sufficient?

The current level of transparency, as mentioned above, is not sufficient. We see an increasing role given to certain organisations not clear whom and what they represent.

4. Where the Commission publishes calls for application for membership in expert groups, do you consider that these calls provide for selection criteria which sufficiently take into account the need for a balanced composition of expert groups? If not, where do you see room for improvement? In your view, could the Commission do more to raise awareness about these calls, with a view to encouraging applications? If so, what concrete steps could it take in this regard?

Generally there is no selection criteria of applicants to the OMC groups, only a selection of possible organisations to be included to the groups.

5. Do you have any experience in applying for membership in a Commission expert group? If so, did you face any problems in the application process? If not, are you aware of any such problems faced by civil society organisations? Based on your experience, do the costs inherent in participation/the lack of comprehensive reimbursement schemes discourage civil society organisations from applying for membership?

As mentioned before, there is no problem with the application if we have already made numerous steps before to convince DG EAC that we have relevant expertise to obtain seats in the groups. However, the problem recently is that both the Commission and the government representatives of the groups would like to close out social partners from the groups. It is a daily battle for us to obtain information and invitations to new expert groups.

6. Please give us your views on which measures could contribute to a more balanced composition of Commission expert groups.

We believe that relevant European-level sectoral social partner organisations should be always presented in the groups at least by 1 person from the employees' and 1 by the employers' organisations.

7. Do you have any other comments?