

The European Employment Strategy

Implications for Scotland

June 1999

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Paper 17
June 1999

**The European Employment Strategy:
Implications for Scotland**

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Introduction

'The issue of employment is central to the concerns of Europe's citizens and every effort must be made to combat unemployment, the unacceptable level of which poses a threat to the cohesion of our societies. In the face of that challenge, to which there is no easy answer, the European Council today, for the first time focusing entirely on the issue of employment, wishes to mark a new departure in the thinking and action upon which the Union's Member States have been embarked since the Essen European Council.'

European Council Presidency Conclusions, Luxembourg 1997.

Unemployment has been endemic in Europe since the 1970s. Although successive employment-orientated macroeconomic policy responses have been initiated, access to the labour market has been fragmented, employment rates have remained low and long-term unemployment has become an increasing trend. According to latest figures, unemployment stands at 17.4 million, or 10% of the workforce, of whom nearly 9 million are long-term unemployed.

In the short time since its inception, the European employment strategy has developed rapidly. Back in November 1997 at the extraordinary Jobs Summit in Luxembourg, EU leaders reached political agreement on the need for a co-ordinated strategy for employment based on sound macroeconomic policies, an efficient single market and labour market modernisation. In the space of only eighteen months, Member States are preparing to submit a second set of National Action Plans for employment (NAPs) and the employment strategy is entering its second year of implementation.

The aim of this paper is to outline the importance of the 'European employment strategy' to Scotland and to demonstrate that success of the strategy depends on an integrated approach in the development and implementation of economic and employment policies at European, national and local levels.

Treaty of Amsterdam – A Watershed

The Treaty of Amsterdam represented a watershed in linking economic and employment policy in the same agenda for jobs. Despite the fact that the issue of employment failed to feature on the original agenda of the Intergovernmental Conference, it soon became a priority at the negotiating table. Some suggest that this was due to the failure of EU governments to make progress in other important policy areas – namely institutional reform - whilst others claim it was primarily a result of a change in government in both the UK and France. Either way, employment policy was to be symbolically included in a separate Title of the Treaty, following that of EMU, in the first

section of the Amsterdam Treaty covering the 'European Union and its Citizens.'

The new Treaty agreed in Amsterdam in June 1997 represented a political breakthrough in establishing that '*Member States . . . shall regard promoting employment as a matter of common concern and shall coordinate their action.*' (Article 2).

Although Member States continue to retain primary responsibility for their own employment policies, for the first time they agreed a European-level framework for a common strategy based on common objectives and targets, similar to those employed for economic policy.

In addition to action at the level of the Member State, the Amsterdam Treaty provides for Community level action by committing the Union to a high level of employment as an explicit objective:

'The objective of a high level of employment shall be taken into consideration in the formulation and implementation of Community policies and activities.' (Article 127.2, Consolidated Treaties).

This is intended to complement the macroeconomic objectives of stability and growth which have driven Economic and Monetary Union. Indeed, Europe's employment strategy is built on the premise that economic progress and structural reform are mutually reinforcing processes. It is no longer a case of passively managing unemployment but of actively promoting employment and access to employment against a background of economic growth and stability.

The Amsterdam Treaty also establishes an Employment Committee along the lines of the Monetary Committee established for EMU. The Employment Committee, composed of two members and two alternates from each Member State and the Commission, monitors the development of national employment policies. It operates in an advisory capacity and formulates opinions on its own initiative or at the request of the Council or the Commission. The Employment Committee is also required to consult the social partners and assists the Council in the annual preparation of the Employment Guidelines.

Finally, under Article 129 of the Treaty, the Council can adopt incentive measures on employment designed to encourage cooperation between Member States through the exchanges of information and best practice and the promotion of innovative approaches and pilot projects. These projects will have a maximum duration of 5 years and a ceiling on funding and cannot include measures aimed at the harmonisation of the laws and regulations of Member States. This clearly reflects the belief in Council that not only should funding in this area be kept to a minimum but that such policies are the preserve of Member States under the principle of subsidiarity. Interestingly, the European Parliament has right of co-decision in this area and past disputes over the legal bases of social policy programmes, such as the Poverty Programme, would suggest that differences of opinion over the disbursement of funds could occur in future.

The European Employment Strategy

The political commitment of Member States to embark on concrete action in the field of employment was clearly demonstrated by the agreement reached to implement the terms and provisions of the Employment Title *ex ante* i.e. before formal ratification of the Treaty, and to convene a special Jobs Summit in November 1997.

The Luxembourg Jobs Summit paved the way for a convergence process based on quantified and comparable targets to meet the challenge of structural reform common to all European economies. From the beginning, the strategy has recognised the importance of local economic development and partnership for creating jobs and growth and consequently local and regional actors and the social partners have been accorded an important role in the implementation of the strategy. This is evident from the 4 pillars on which the strategy is based:

- **Employability** – investing in human resources through a shift from passive to active labour market measures;
- **Entrepreneurship** - encouraging the development of jobs, including at the local level, through a series of measures designed to cut red tape and make it easier to start up new businesses;
- **Adaptability** – modernising the organisation of work through social partnership agreements designed to ensure security as well as flexibility in the workplace;
- **Equal opportunities** – tackling gender gaps, reconciling work and family life and reintegrating people with disabilities and minorities into working life.

In each of these areas, local actors play an important role in creating local employment initiatives to providing education and training opportunities to negotiating flexible forms of work organisation.

The ‘Luxembourg process’ encompasses the co-ordination of Member States’ employment policies on the basis of commonly agreed **Employment Guidelines**. The Guidelines form the basis of National Acts Plans for employment (NAPs) drafted by the Member States, incorporating national employment priorities in addition to measures laid down in the guidelines themselves. The NAPs are subject to peer group review on an annual basis. The Luxembourg process requires that evaluations of Member States’ employment policies are carried out by a surveillance procedure:

- The Commission proposes the Employment Guidelines following consultation of the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the Employment Committee. The Guidelines are then adopted by the Council acting by qualified majority:

- The Guidelines are elaborated in National Action Plans (NAPs) for employment prepared by the Member States and are updated annually in response to the setting of annual Guidelines. The NAPs are monitored annually by the Commission and the Council.
- The European Council adopts the conclusions on the employment situation in the EU in the Joint Employment Report¹ in coordination with the Annual Economic Report prepared by the Council and the Commission;
- The Council, acting by qualified majority and on a proposal from the Commission, can adopt recommendations directed at individual Member States.

Although the ‘Luxembourg Process’ is modelled on the convergence procedure in place for national economic policies under EMU – with targets and measurements of performance - recommendations made in relation to employment policy have no formal binding effect and do not envisage sanctions. The action plans are, however, subject to peer group review which has proved very successful in ensuring high levels of performance.

The first real assessment of the NAPs took place in the run up to the Cardiff European Council in June 1998 when it was shown that Member States had tended to focus on the two pillars of employability and entrepreneurship. Following evaluation by the Commission, the European Council agreed modifications to the employment guidelines for 1999.

Employment Guidelines for 1999

In the interests of continuity and consistency in the employment strategy, the 4 pillar structure is preserved and the Guidelines for Member States’ employment policies in 1999 remain very similar to those adopted in 1998. The first three of these Guidelines set quantifiable targets at European level applicable to all Member States:

1. Every unemployed young person is offered a new start before reaching 6 months of unemployment, in the form of training, retraining, work practice, a job or other employability measure;
2. Unemployed adults are also offered a fresh start before reaching 12 months of unemployment by one of the aforementioned means, or by accompanying individual vocational guidance;
3. Member States will endeavour to increase the number of people benefiting from active measures to improve their employability. In order to increase the numbers of unemployed offered training, Member States will fix a

¹ The Joint Employment Report is prepared by the Commission and Council. In the Council, social affairs ministers and economic and finance ministers act jointly.

target of achieving the average of the 3 most successful Member States and at least 20%.

In each of these areas, local actors play an important role in a national strategy aimed at alleviating unemployment, from creating local employment initiatives to providing education and training and re-skilling opportunities.

This role has been underlined in the 1999 guidelines which have been expanded to include horizontal measures such as employment generation at the local level and in the third sector, community development, environmental considerations and equal opportunities. Consequently, there are 22 guidelines for 1999, compared to 19 in the previous year, each including performance indicators to be set by Member States.

The main adjustments in the Guidelines relate to a greater emphasis being placed on active measures by reviewing tax and benefit systems to encourage the take up of work and training opportunities. For this purpose, employment services are being upgraded. Lifelong learning is also underlined with the establishment of quantitative national goals as a means to improve the adaptability of the labour force, particularly in relation to the information technologies. The concept of 'active ageing' and the application of lifelong learning to older workers are further innovations.

Furthermore, the 1999 Employment Guidelines specifically emphasise the special role of local actors under a new heading entitled 'exploiting new opportunities for job creation.' Under this new Guideline, local and regional authorities and the social partners are requested to promote measures to exploit fully the possibilities offered by job creation at local level, in the social economy, the area of environmental technologies and in the service sector.

The service sector is one area that could be of particular importance to employment creation in Scotland. Although it should not be at the expense of employment creation in other areas, the service sector has job creating potential. For example, employment in the service sector in Scotland has risen by 17% over the past decade compared to a fall in manufacturing by over 18%.

European Employment Pact

Following the successful implementation of the Employment Guidelines in 1998, the Vienna Summit of December that year provided a clear mandate for the development of a '*European Employment Pact in the framework of the Luxembourg process . . . based on Article 127.*' Article 127 of the Amsterdam Treaty envisages the mainstreaming of employment in the formulation and implementation of Community policies and activities.

The European Employment Pact, to be presented during the Cologne European Council, attempts to systematically harness the two employment processes currently underway and to provide a coordination procedure and

synergy of action between a macroeconomic policy based on growth and stability and employment policy. The two processes in action are:

- The **Luxembourg Process** consisting of structural reform of the labour market and improving the synergy between employment and economic policies through the Employment Guidelines and NAPs;
- The **Cardiff Economic Reform Process** concerned with the reform of product and capital markets e.g. the integration of financial markets; the effect of national regulation on tax regimes and capital markets; market liberalisation and regulatory reform.

The Employment Pact aims to introduce a dialogue mechanism on the coordination of macroeconomic policy. This has become known as the **Cologne Process** of macroeconomic coordination between the Council, Commission and social partners together with the European Central Bank (ECB). It is anticipated that the development of this macroeconomic dialogue should ensure synergy of action and an integrated strategy to economic and employment policy.

The European Social Fund

While all Structural Funds have an important role to play, the new generation ESF, as laid down in the new Regulation, will be the main instrument used in the fight against unemployment and for implementing the European employment strategy. In particular, the conclusions of the Vienna European Council recommended that *'the reform of the ESF be used to strengthen support for the employment strategy'* and this link is made explicit in the new Regulation.

In effect, the Fund will be used to amplify measures introduced nationally to develop the labour market and this will require a greater synergy between the priorities laid down in the NAPs and the targeting of the ESF. The Commission has already requested that Member States make explicit the link between their employment policy commitments in the NAPs and the ESF programming bids for the years 2000-2006.

The two processes will actually run concurrently: from June until September the Commission will be evaluating the NAPs in relation to the 1999 employment guidelines and Member States will be preparing their ESF applications. In addition, adoption of the employment guidelines for the year 2000 will coincide with the start date for ESF programmes under the new programming period.

In bringing human resource development centre-stage, the ESF will support active labour market policies to fight unemployment, develop lifelong learning and education systems, address economic and social change and promote social inclusion and equal opportunities in all areas not covered by Objectives 1 and 2. The ESF Regulation actually provides a 'policy frame of reference' to

illustrate how the ESF supports the NAPs across all Objectives. The ESF will consequently play an important role in forging local partnerships and strengthening regional strategies.

In future, ESF programmes should be tailored to support national employment regeneration in areas such as education, training and lifelong learning (particularly in research, science and technology), active labour market measures to assist the long-term unemployed and equal opportunities in access to the labour market, including special measures to assist women. Furthermore, the ESF will be used to promote local employment initiatives and develop the job-creating potential of the information society.

This will bring new responsibilities to the Scottish Parliament, not just in the administrative and financial arrangements of the Funds but in taking on board responsibility for implementing policies. The new structural fund programmes will continue to use 'partnerships' involving local authorities, LECs, educational establishments, NGOs and other actors who will be responsible for approving the eligibility of projects. Consequently, a *modus operandi* between the Scottish Parliament and the programme partnerships should be established from an early stage. This could prove difficult this year given that the partnerships are already developing Objective 3 programmes in anticipation of the four month deadline which will be applied once the Structural Funds are finally agreed.

Another important tool for human resources development is the new Community Initiative EQUAL which will consolidate the achievements of the current EMPLOYMENT and ADAPT initiatives. The main objective of EQUAL is to promote co-operation in order to develop ways of combating all forms of exclusion, discrimination and inequalities in the labour market. It will become an important test bed for initiatives taken under the aegis of the employment strategy by promoting transnational projects as examples of best practice. This will provide a lot of scope for innovative local employment initiatives involving the public and private sectors, third sector organisations and NGOs.

The Importance of Education, Training and Lifelong Learning

The information technologies have revolutionised the way in which we learn, live and work. The advent of the information society has opened up opportunities for access to learning and knowledge and new flexible forms of work organisation. This has served to enhance Europe's economic performance but at the same time it has exposed the structural deficiencies of the economy and put the most vulnerable sections of the labour market at risk. Technological development has meant that education and training is becoming outdated much more quickly than in the past. The challenge now lies in equipping the workforce with the skills necessary to match the demands of the labour market.

The European employment strategy has therefore aimed at creating a high-skill workforce in a knowledge-based economy by developing human

resources through training, education and continual learning. In line with the strategy, future approaches to local economic development should focus on updating skills through the provision of education, training and lifelong learning. According to recent demographic projections, the number of 20-30 year olds in the labour market will drop by 17% by the year 2005. This translates to a loss of 9 million workers who will be the best trained and highly skilled recent labour markets have ever known. At the same time, there will be a residual of 5.5 million workers aged between 50 and 60 years of age who would not have had access to the same level and quality of education and training particularly in the new technologies.

Interestingly, the only quantifiable targets, or benchmarks, in the Guidelines set at the European level relate to education and training thereby illustrating the importance attached to these measures. The commitment to increase to more than 20% the retraining capacity for the unemployed represents a considerable challenge. To meet this target requires doubling the current training capacity of the EU which will necessitate coordinated action between governments, training organisations and educational establishments.

In addition, the 1999 Employment Guidelines call on the Member States and the social partners to define lifelong learning, particularly in relation to the information technologies, in order to set targets according to national circumstances. The Employment Committee actually agreed a conceptual definition of lifelong learning in May this year and this will be formally agreed at the Cologne European Council with the result that Member States will be able to set national targets in relation to access and participation in lifelong learning. In Scotland, both SCET and the social partners will have a significant role to play in this process.

Following on from the government's Lifelong Learning Paper *Opportunity Scotland* and *Skills for Scotland*, local authorities will be involved in coordinating Lifelong Learning Development Plans in partnership with LECs and further education colleges. Other developments such as the introduction of the Scottish University for Industry in the year 2000, utilising objective 4 funding, illustrate the new partnership approach being adopted in the provision of education and training.

With this in mind, future EU education and training programmes such as Socrates II and Leonardo II should be targeted as measures for improving employability. The emphasis on lifelong learning is likely to intensify under the forthcoming Finnish Presidency which has indicated its support for further measures to promote a learning age.

From Policy into Action: The Local / Regional dimension

As the European employment strategy clearly recognises, it falls on agents of local economic development to implement employment measures. Local and regional authorities play a crucial role in generating employment – as major employers, through their knowledge of the local and regional economy, and as actors in economic development. Measures addressing the modernisation

of work organisation or the provision of training must take account of local conditions, resources, skills and labour supply if they are to be successful.

The European employment strategy is intended to be an inclusive strategy, embracing partnership at local/regional, national and European levels. For Scotland, success of the strategy will depend on the ability of the Scottish Parliament, local authorities, the social partners, LECs and other economic and social actors to work together in partnership to translate the policy framework into jobs. It will also crucially depend on the working relationship that develops between Holyrood and Westminster in both the formulation and implementation of the UK's national employment strategy. The European employment strategy is extremely important in this respect, as it sets the policy framework within which Scottish policy must operate.

The government have attempted to develop employment policies through a process of partnership. The flagship New Deal programme, for local communities through to young people, has required partnership at all levels, both in its development and implementation, and is a commonly cited example of best practice in shifting from passive to active labour market policies.

Following the initial evaluation of Member States' employment policies for 1998, the Commission have noted the varying degrees in which local and regional actors were involved in both the consultation and implementation of NAPs. To discover whether a correlation exists between the level of participation of local and regional partners and the structure of devolved government would require a separate analysis of all fifteen NAPs. At this stage, it is enough to say that there exists a wide differential between those NAPs that were designed with the explicit participation of regional partners and those that only gave a fleeting reference to the role of subnational government.

The UK probably falls somewhere between the two extremes: the UK's NAP for 1999 includes significant measures to be taken in Scotland and in particular, includes more detailed measures to be taken both by local authorities and the Scottish Parliament in the future. Preparation of this year's NAP has also involved a consultation exercise with regional and local authorities, the voluntary sector, bodies representing small firms and disadvantaged groups and the social partners in an attempt to incorporate distinctive Scottish views within a common national policy framework.

The extent of local and regional participation in the employment strategy is one area that will attract greater attention in the future. The Commission have already suggested that there should be a greater integration of local initiatives in future guidelines and NAPs. Moreover, the Committee of the Regions has called for the establishment of an initiative, 'Local Action for Employment 1999', to encourage local and regional authorities to participate fully in the employment strategy. This has been welcomed by the current Commission who have indicated that it could, subject to agreement by the new College of Commissioners, become a key focus in the year 2000.

The European Employment Strategy in the Framework of Devolution in Scotland

The devolved powers of the Scottish Parliament coincide with many competencies of the European Union and it will become increasingly difficult to separate the European agenda from the 'domestic' agenda. From education and training to economic development to the environment, local and regional actors will be actively involved in shaping and implementing a wide range of European policies.

While employment policy in the broadest sense remains a reserved power, the Scottish Administration is responsible for training and skills development which form an integral part of the overall employment agenda. It is not foreseen to have a separate Scottish action plan for employment for two reasons: employment policy is not a devolved function and, secondly, the EU's employment strategy envisaged that the response to the annual Employment Guidelines should be a national action plan at the level of the Member State. It follows that the UK plan will continue to include targets for the UK as a whole and that the annual assessments will be carried out by the government centrally.

That is not to preclude local targets and delivery methods for Scotland as part of an integrated employment strategy. Indeed, the UK's action plan for 1999 includes considerable regional variations, including the continued development of regional and territorial partnerships to meet local needs and local conditions. The Scottish Office has also been consulted by the Department for Education and Employment on the drafting of the NAP and will be informed of the progress made with respect to the annual assessments in order to ensure that Scottish interests are met.

Scotland also has other opportunities to influence the UK's employment priorities. Scotland is currently producing its own Operational Programme under Objective 3 and this includes information not only on training and skills development but also on the employment situation in Scotland. These quantified priorities and measures should be consistent with the UK's NAP and provide another conduit for Scottish input into the national strategy.

Conclusion

Employment is no longer a political aspiration. The coordination of Member States' employment policies is not only anchored in the Treaty but is strengthened. The inclusion of a Title on employment in the Treaty at last allows for the possibility of a combined European strategy on jobs and the European Union is finally in a position to demonstrate that it can provide an additional impetus to the employment debate.

The European employment strategy represents a concerted effort to develop an integrated approach to employment, introducing a synergy between macroeconomic policy and structural policies. Just as EU-wide measurements of inflation and growth presently chart macroeconomic performance and progress, the targets expressed in the Employment Guidelines chart Europe's success in creating jobs and combating unemployment.

Although the Guidelines are adapted to national circumstances, the collective aim is to coordinate efforts to realise our shared potential in ways appropriate for each sector, region and Member State. The Scottish Parliament will play an important role in this process: it will assist in the overall framing of the national employment strategy, primarily through its contribution on training and skills development and local economic development which form an integral part of the employment agenda.

The future challenge now lies in ensuring the successful implementation of the strategy at the local and regional level. In Scotland this will mean a combined effort on the part of the Scottish Parliament, local authorities, LECs, the voluntary sector and NGOs to coordinate strategies for local economic development and to ensure that these are reflected in the UK's overall national strategy for employment.

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