

NSC Education & Research thematic group Annual Report 2003

This report provides a summary of the work of the Education & Research Thematic Group since the NSC General Assembly of 2002.

Meetings of the group

The Education & Research Group has held two meetings since the last NSC General Assembly:

1. 6-7 November in Blankenberge, attended by 11 group members.

This was the first occasion on which the Education & Research Group held a meeting at the same time as an event run by another thematic group. The meeting coincided with the Environment Group's Wind Energy conference, and a joint reception was held to bring together members of both groups. As a result, the Education & Research Group benefited from being observers at the conference of another group. Some contacts were made at this event between group members and at least one member of the Education & Research Group has been involved in discussions concerning some form of joint participation in a future seminar.

2. 13-14 February in Groningen, attended by 13 group members.

This meeting took a different format from those held previously in order to allow a presentation from a research organisation. This was given by Professor Pieter Pellenbarg of the University of Groningen's Faculty of Spatial Sciences, who talked about the teaching programmes and the research work of his department.

The Education & Research group has wanted to involve research institutions in its work, and this presentation made a promising start by giving us a range of possibilities to consider. Professor Pellenbarg put forward some suggestions which were not restricted to the work of the Education & Research Group, and might also be of interest to other thematic groups. Some suggestions were made for areas of work in which this university faculty could contribute to the work of the North Sea Commission through its thematic groups.

The presentation took us through the range of courses provided by the faculty, several of which have been revised in order to fit into the new bachelors/masters programmes which are being adopted by universities in the Netherlands. In addition we looked at some of the research being undertaken. This included the following areas:

- a study of how companies choose their location, how this fits with regional development, and how spatial development influences labour markets
- planning for environmental quality, and interaction between demographic change and environmental change

Professor Pellenbarg showed some very interesting spatial maps which demonstrated how entrepreneurs look at the spatial qualities of their location, and what their perceptions are of the most desirable locations for their businesses. This showed that, in general, in the countries studied (the Netherlands and Germany) entrepreneurs turn their backs to the North Sea and look towards locating their businesses nearer to what they see as larger centres of commercial activity and population density.

There is a wealth of information available for business projects aiming for Interreg funding and it is possible that the Education & Research group, and others, will be able use this data as baseline information when structuring their projects.

In addition, some good progress was made towards the planning of the education conference to be held on 11-12 December.

The meeting also resolved to use the NSC website more interactively, and asked the Secretariat if the forum section could be activated for the use of the group. A number of areas

for discussion groups were suggested which could prepare the ground for themed seminars to take place either in a virtual environment, or as separate events in the future.

Education & Research Conference

This is provisionally planned for December 2003, although the date and venue are still to be confirmed.

The conference theme is "Learning from the North Sea" and is designed to take forward the outcomes and findings of other North Sea projects through to an education context, for the development of educational resources and the formation of new education projects. Some project outcomes of other thematic groups are being investigated for development possibilities. Examples have been provided by the Environment group, the Business Development group and the Fisheries group, and some new areas are being developed by the Education & Research group. The conference needs further examples from the other thematic groups from any of their work which has not yet involved an education aspect.

A draft programme is available. The planning group for the conference has met twice, and two further occasions by teleconferencing. A flyer with early details for the conference will be available later in June and the final conference details will be issued in September.

Events planned with other thematic groups

The Education & Research group will be involved in a conference planned by the Fisheries Group to be held in September 2003. This also involves the Business Development Group. The conference theme is "Women and Fisheries" and the Education & Research group will provide a workshop focusing on approaches to childcare.

Another conference involving the Transport & Communications Group and the Business Development Group is in the very early stages of planning.

Projects originating from the group

The Education & Research group has two projects which are still aiming for Interreg funding. One is the result of a combined initiative with the Business Development group. The development of these projects continues to take up considerable time and effort of group members and the co-ordinator.

The group recognises that Interreg funding is difficult to access for education projects. Many of the early participants in the work of the group saw Interreg as a source of funding which they had not approached and have subsequently been disappointed by the lack of early results.

Group membership

Currently about 40 receive details of the group's meetings, although attendance at meetings continues to record an average of 13 people.

As the understanding of what Interreg can provide has increased, those with a less realistic chance of accessing funding have attended less frequently, causing group membership to fluctuate, and making it difficult to achieve more than a small core of regular attenders at meetings.

The co-ordinator feels that because there is not an obvious area for integrated political lobbying or action on routine matters in connection with education, there is a perception that the group exists in the first instance to promote projects. As Interreg is not a good programme to support education projects, the result has been that group attendance has not increased.

However, the co-ordinator looks forward to the development of new aspects of the work of the group, and also to any further opportunities to work with the other thematic groups, for example in the fisheries conference to be held later this year.

Chairman of the Education & Research group

The group has been most fortunate to have had the chairmanship of Joop Boertjens, of the Province of Groningen, over the first two formative years. Joop Boertjens brought to the group strong but sensitive leadership, a lively and positive approach in all its meetings, and

an amazing sense of humour. The group will miss his personal style and pragmatic way of working.

The group has also lost its vice-chairman, Ted Harris, of Aberdeen who was very positive in his support for all of the work of the group.

At the time of writing this report, the group has neither a chairman nor a vice chairman. We look forward to the general Assembly of 2003, when we shall know who will take on the challenge of this relatively young group.

Plans for future work

The Education & Research group is beginning to attract new membership and we hope that this will help us to bring new dimensions to our work. One example of this is the suggestion from a new member that the group looks at "how to ensure quality in education". This is an example of a theme which might attract group members from a wider spectrum of education than currently attend our meetings.

An area which we need to explore is the different phases of education and training which are the direct responsibility of member councils around the North Sea. There are already a number of differences which are apparent, for example the responsibility of some councils finishes when students reach the age of 16, whereas others take up the responsibility, often from a district council, when students become 16. This difference in responsibilities and functions has made it difficult to engage group members in activities which are relevant to everyone.

The group also needs to build on its first attempts to involve research institutions, which included the involvement at its last meeting of the University of Groningen's Faculty of Spatial Sciences. In addition the 2003 Study Tour includes a visit to the Alfred Wegener Institute and a presentation from the International University of Bremen.

Support from the NSC Secretariat

The group continues to receive considerable advice and support to the co-ordinator and the group, and the co-ordinator would like to thank the Secretariat for the help and advice provided over the last year.

And in conclusion...

The group looks forward to meeting its new chairman and vice-chairman, and to the meetings and activities planned for the year ahead.