

Success Stories

The Luxembourg School System Tomorrow

Education, one of the fundamental necessities of any society, is a highly complex and emotive subject. How do you get the best out of a child, while at the same time having structure and coherence in the teaching method?

This question has been the priority of Romain Martin since he began work on the VIVRE Project: The Luxembourg School System Tomorrow, at the beginning of 2004. The main aim of the research was to gather cohesive information about the strengths and weaknesses of the school system at present and to look at other educational systems throughout the world in order to ascertain whether a fundamentally different system could function successfully in Luxembourg. The study will be used as a foundation for opening up discussions on a national basis with governmental bodies, including the Education Authority and, while it is still too early to draw concrete conclusions, present them with different scenarios of how the education system could be changed.

The research was broken into three steps: part 1, to analyse data from existing databases, mainly the International PISA studies of 2000 and 2003, alongside the last-known Luxembourg school system database MAGRIP from 1968; part 2, to collect views about the current and potential future functioning and structure of the Luxembourg school system within focus groups made up of collective bodies of the education system; and part 3, to conduct an in-depth study amongst pupils, parents and teachers to ascertain their relationship towards education as a whole.

Most important in the first step of the project was to fully understand how the school system works today and compare it with developments in other countries, in particular Canada and Scandinavia who have a radically different school system from Luxembourg and who achieve a continually high performance in the PISA studies. In those countries schooling is adapted around the individual child and his or her learning proficiency (e.g. if they excel in mathematics they will automatically advance to a higher level in that particular subject), rather than fitting the child into standardised groups which is how the school system in Luxembourg functions. At present if a child does badly in one subject (e.g. German language), they will automatically be held back and asked to repeat a class regardless of how they are doing with other subjects. This can be very demotivating, especially if the child is excelling in a different subject and is perhaps struggling with German due to the fact that his/her mother-tongue is English or Portuguese.

'One of our main problems is that we have a very heterogeneous population, which is a big challenge for the school system to deal with. We should be the champions of managing heterogeneity but we really are not as we are functioning still with the mechanics of the past; which is to try and get out of this heterogeneity, homogeneous groups,' explains Martin.

What came out of this part of the study was that the education system has not changed fundamentally since the last data study in 1968, even though the population has altered significantly.

The difficulty at the moment is to imagine how a completely different school system could function in Luxembourg. Although the general consensus points towards a new method (the disappointing results from the PISA studies have underlined this and indeed the study from 2000 was one of the benchmarks for the necessity of the research programme), it is fundamental to be sure the changes will work better for Luxembourg's diverse population and not just revolutionise for the sake of it. What the research project has done is gather together the information and tools necessary to open discussions and look at the possibilities.

But already there are changes on the horizon. A new, experimental primary school (www.eisschoul.lu) is to be opened later this year, and will be part run by the Luxembourg University. It has been inspired partially by the results from the research project and will include areas such as abandoning class repeating and looking at different ways to manage our diverse population. This is a very important step in being able to research and evaluate how a different school system could function in Luxembourg and, interestingly enough, the demand from parents to place their children there is over five times greater than the 100 pupil limit for the first year.

The contribution from the FNR has been more than financial and one of the most important points Martin found was their flexibility, 'There is a quality control based on your reports but if you feel that the project is developing in a new direction, they will listen to your arguments and, if they feel it is important to the research, will allow you to adapt to your new findings. That is very, very helpful as you never know where you'll end up when you start a three-year project.

While it is clear that we are still a long way from implementing the ultimate school system for Luxembourg, without this research there would be no basis to work from and no possible scenarios for understanding the necessity for change. Now that the groundwork has been done the team will continue working on the research with the Ministry of Education to assist and guide them in making informed decisions to finding the correct solution to the situation and there will be a more coherent and continual system of data gathering in order to build up a fuller picture of how the education system is functioning.

