I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

486TH PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 16 AND 17 JANUARY 2013

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Unleashing the potential of children and young people with high intellectual abilities in the European Union' (own-initiative opinion)

(2013/C 76/01)

Rapporteur: **Mr RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA-CARO**

On 19 January 2012, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

Unleashing the potential of children and young people with high intellectual abilities in the European Union.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 20 December 2012.

At its 486th plenary session, held on 16 and 17 January 2013 (meeting of 16 January), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 131 votes in favour, none against with 13 abstentions.

1. **Recommendations**

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee is aware that the issue of children and young people with high intellectual abilities has been fairly well researched, as a result of the studies conducted over the last decades and the extensive corpus of specialist scientific literature ([1]). However, given the importance of this topic, the EESC recommends that the European Commission and the Member States support further studies and research and adopt suitable measures to cater for diversity among all types of people. These

([1]) Examples of studies on high abilities and their educational response include:
Martinez Torres, Mercé and Guirado, Angel (coords.), *Altas capacidades intelectuales. Pautas de actuación, orientación, intervención y evaluación en el período escolar* (High intellectual abilities: Guidelines for action, orientation, intervention and assessment in the school period), Barcelona, Editorial Graó, 2012.
Torrego, Juan Carlos (coord.), *Alumnos con altas capacidades y aprendizaje cooperativo. Un modelo de respuesta educativa* (Students with high abilities and cooperative learning. An educational response model), Madrid, Fundación SM, 2012.
Pfeiffer, Stephen: *Current perspectives on the identification and assessment of gifted students*, in *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 2011.
Wallace, B. and Erikson, G.: *Diversity in Gifted Education. International perspectives on global issues*, New York, Routledge, 2006. Sternberg, R.J. and Davidson, J.E.: *Conceptions of giftedness*, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
Sternberg, R J. (ed.): *Definitions and conceptions of giftedness*, Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press, 2004.

should include programmes that would tap the potential of gifted children and young people in a wide variety of fields. The aims of this action would include facilitating employment and employability within the framework of the EU and, in a context of economic crisis, enhancing specialist knowledge and preventing brain drain to other parts of the world.

1.2 The Committee proposes nurturing the development and potential of children and young people with high abilities throughout the various stages and forms of their education, avoiding premature specialisation and encouraging schools to cater for diversity, and exploiting the possibilities of cooperative and non-formal learning.

1.3 The Committee recommends fostering education and lifelong learning, bearing in mind that each individual's intellectual potential is not static but evolves differently throughout the various stages of his or her life.

1.4 The Committee recommends that, in the future, greater consideration be given to each Member State's existing models for and experience in working with highly gifted children, particularly those which benefit all of society, facilitate cohesion, reduce school failure and encourage better education in accordance with the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy.

1.5 The Committee highlights the need to detect, in the workplace, those workers (particularly young workers) who are able and willing to develop their intellectual capabilities and contribute to innovation, and to give them the opportunity to further their education in the field that best matches their ambitions and centres of interest.

1.6 The Committee proposes improving educational care for children and young people with high abilities, in terms of the following aspects:

— initial and ongoing training of teaching staff regarding the typical characteristics of highly able students, as well as the detection and educational care they need;

— pooling of procedures for the early detection of high intellectual abilities among students in general and in particular among those from disadvantaged social backgrounds;

— designing and implementing educational measures aimed at students with high intellectual abilities. These measures should include actions inside and outside ordinary educational establishments;

— incorporating into teacher training the values of humanism, the reality of multiculturalism, the educational use of ICT and, lastly, the encouragement of creativity, innovation and initiative.

1.7 Improving the care provided for highly able students should include their emotional education (which is particularly important during adolescence), the acquisition of social skills with a view to facilitating integration and inclusion in society, integration into the labour market, and fostering their teamwork skills.

1.8 Schemes and procedures for student exchanges and visits abroad should be tapped into so that gifted students can take part in them, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.9 Opportunities for exchanging information and good practices on detecting and caring for gifted students should be harnessed across the EU Member States.

1.10 Entrepreneurship should be fostered among children and young people with high abilities, with a view to encouraging responsibility and solidarity towards society overall.

2. **General context**

2.1 The programme entitled Europe 2020: A European Strategy for smart, green and inclusive growth, adopted by the Commission in 2010, includes as one of its three basic priorities the quest for smart growth through the development of an economy based on knowledge and innovation. From this angle, the education of all citizens can be seen as a key resource through which to guarantee the future of the European Union, and this includes improved detection and educational care for highly able people.

2.2 The current education policies of the EU Member States focus strongly on catering for diversity among students, pledging to provide each student with the educational care they need to realise their full potential. As part of the efforts aimed at all students requiring specific educational support, it is necessary to increase the resources currently devoted to those with high intellectual abilities.

2.3 Looking at the current situation in the Member States, there is much variation when it comes to detecting and providing educational care for particularly gifted students. It is also clear that there is a need to improve educational practices and activities aimed at this type of students – something that is influenced by the scarcity of targeted teacher training in this area.

3. **High intellectual abilities**

3.1 *Concept*

3.1.1 International studies and research concur that there are highly gifted people in all social groups ([2]). This principle can be applied to the population of the EU Member States. In social, political and educational terms, detection and care for people with high abilities is a relatively recent concept that will certainly gain weight over the coming years. The abovementioned studies all agree that improving detection and educational care for highly able students requires the involvement of all sectors of society: politicians, teaching staff, scientists and researchers, families and social partners.

3.1.2 Specialist scientific literature on the topic of high abilities recognises various terms in this regard: precociousness (results above those expected for a specific age), talentedness (particular skills in very specific areas such as maths, music, etc.) and, lastly, giftedness or high ability. This last concept – giftedness or high ability – is currently defined in terms of the following traits:

— above-average intellectual ability, with regard to both general and specific skills. Although the traditional yardstick has been the presence of an intelligence quotient of over 130 (100 being the average), in recent years this criterion has been extended and loosened to include the assessment of other equally important indicators:

— high dedication and commitment to tasks: perseverance, interest, resilience, self-confidence, etc.

— high levels of creativity, flexibility and originality in asking questions, responding to and solving problems and difficulties that arise.

([2]) Based on the most studied group, i.e. the school-age population, the estimated percentage of highly gifted people ranges from 2 % to 15 % of the population, depending on the indicators used to make this estimate. The most traditional criterion, IQ assessment, has tended to take as a reference the existence of an IQ of 130 or above, which applies to around 2 % of the population. Nowadays it is accepted that this criterion is very restrictive, and assessing intellectual capacity is only one factor to be taken into account when identifying high abilities. The concept of high abilities has therefore been extended to include other factors such as creativity, originality and the ability to relate, deduce and extrapolate. From this more current perspective, it is estimated that the percentage of people with high abilities could be around 10 % or even as high as 15 % of the general population, although the most commonly accepted estimates stand at between 5 and 10 % of the population. For an introduction to the subject, see the already classic studies by Joseph Renzulli or the more recent studies by Borland, J.H. 'Myth 2. The gifted constitute 3 % to 5 % of the population', in *Gifted child quarterly*, No 53, 2009; Miraca, G.: *Exceptionally gifted children*, New York, Routledge, 2004, and Robson, D: *High IQ kids: collected insights, information and personal stories from the experts*, Free spirit publishing, 2007.

Although high ability in the school and academic context tends to go hand in hand with good school results, it is not uncommon to find cases of school failure among students with high abilities. Giftedness should not be seen as a static situation but, rather, as a potential which to be harnessed must be detected, recognised and catered for by society; otherwise, it may be lost.

3.1.3 The scientific literature also agrees that giftedness has many dimensions – i.e. it is broad and cross-disciplinary and cannot be limited to an IQ assessment; it should also take into account aspects such as originality and creativity of thought; and it is frequently conditioned and influenced by family and socio-cultural factors. Sometimes, as may occur with certain people on the autistic spectrum or with particular motor disorders, high abilities may coexist with disability.

3.1.4 Students and people with high abilities are present throughout all social groups and levels, regardless of gender or social standing. However, in practice, detection processes usually bring to light the following aspects which should be taken into account so that they can be offset:

— highly able students are more frequently detected among the middle and upper social classes owing to the fact that their families tend to be better informed, and to the influence of family environments that are educationally and academically stimulating. At times, the low expectations that educational establishments have regarding their students' abilities can adversely affect the detection of gifted students in disadvantaged environments;

— notwithstanding a general trend towards discretion and anonymity among highly able students and people, statistically more highly able male students than female are identified due to cultural and psychodevelopmental factors, pointing to a higher likelihood of anonymity among potentially highly able female students ([3]).

([3]) For example, between 1999 and 2012, the *Programa de Enriquecimiento Educativo para Alumnos con Altas Capacidades de la Comunidad de Madrid* (Programme for educational enhancement of students with high abilities of the Community of Madrid, Spain) registered an almost unchanging participation ratio of 70 % male students to 30 % female students. In this regard, see Pérez, L. Domínguez P. and Alfaro, E. (coords.), *Actas del Seminario: situación actual de la mujer superdotada en la sociedad* (Report on the seminar on the current situation for gifted women in society), Madrid, Consejería de Educación, 2002.

3.1.5 As with the rest of the school population, when referring to highly able students and young people it is important to remember that they form an extremely varied group.

3.1.6 It is possible to come across students with high intellectual ability who struggle to succeed at school and fall among those students who do badly, owing for example to a lack of specific educational care or to problems fitting in. It is also far from uncommon to find students with high abilities who feel ostracised or rejected by their peer group, which also increases the likelihood of school failure. Proper detection and care for highly able students is a factor that can and should help to reduce school drop-out rates and increase the percentage of the population with a higher education, which is one of the basic goals of *Europe 2020: A European Strategy for smart, green and inclusive growth*.

3.2 *Detection and educational monitoring of highly able students*

3.2.1 Improving the care provided for highly able students involves various separate aspects: initial detection; psychological, educational and social assessment to confirm or refute the presence of high abilities; and educational care in its true sense, which can be provided through both formal and non-formal education.

3.2.2 It is commonly accepted that a considerable number of highly able people slip through the net during detection processes. The detection process can be carried out as from the end of pre-school or at the start of primary school. Just as for any other student with specific educational support needs, early detection of high abilities makes it easier to provide the right educational response and care, and to prevent potential school failure or drop-out further down the line. Although high abilities can also be detected at later stages of school or life, this places particular importance on the initial detection and psycho-educational assessment of students that may display high abilities.

3.2.3 Highly able students are usually first detected when their parents or teachers observe that they are standing out from classmates of the same age, or may be showing signs of not fitting in. This initial detection, which must then be confirmed or refuted by specialists, may be based on the following indicators:

— language use: wide vocabulary, accuracy of terms used, complexity of sentence structure;

— strong understanding of complex and abstract ideas; at the same time, may be able to develop or formulate ideas at an unexpected level for their age;

— quality of questions: may be unusual, original, complicated or full of maturity and purpose;

— ability to design systematic and multiple strategies to solve problems;

— ability to learn quickly and easily when interested;

— highly creative when coming up with ideas, goals and solutions to particular problems.

3.2.4 In the early years (up to age 4-5), particular caution must be exercised when identifying highly able students, as the phenomenon of precociousness or the presence of family situations which greatly stimulate academic activity may result in a premature diagnosis which may not be sound or accurate. In such cases it would be useful to carry out reviews at times when high abilities are manifested or to check whether, conversely, the student is approaching levels considered normal.

3.2.5 In disadvantaged social settings, giftedness is often masked by socio-economic shortcomings and difficulties or even by the low expectations of educational centres themselves, and manifests itself less easily. It is important to take this fact into account, and to pay special attention to the development of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to offer them the educational care they need, including the detection of those that may be highly able.

3.2.6 Some issues or expectations relating to highly able students and young people that should be avoided include:

— assuming that gifted children will stand out in all areas of their development, and will be emotionally mature with high self-control, independent, responsible and eager to please their teacher;

— believing that they will stand out in all areas of the school curriculum: teachers often expect brilliant students to achieve brilliant results in every area;

— expecting highly able children to be extremely motivated to do well at school and carry out any task set them with enthusiasm and interest.

3.2.7 Once the parents and teachers suspect that a child or young person may have high abilities, initial detection requires specific assessment instruments and should be carried out by specialists in psychoeducational assessment, who may be assisted by teachers from the educational establishment. This assessment should be as varied and thorough as possible, and should include different contexts (school, social, family) and a range of instruments for gathering information, so that it can be applied to any student, regardless of their family and social background. This extensive, varied assessment serves as the basis for the final psychoeducational report which confirms or refutes the presence of high abilities.

3.3 *Educational care for highly able students*

3.3.1 Once the presence of high abilities has been confirmed, the following factors and circumstances can facilitate an appropriate educational response for these children and young people:

— stimulating environment that fosters potential;

— autonomy and self-control;

— feeling of belonging to group of friends and to peer group;

— acceptance and trust from those around them;

— teaching adapted to suit needs and individual learning rate;

— flexible curriculum with possibility of exploring content in depth;

— access to additional educational resources that complement the basic learning material;

— more flexible teaching with regard to timetables, activities, resources, materials or groups;

— involvement of students in planning their own learning process.

3.3.2 Different teaching and education systems adopt different approaches for meeting the educational needs of students with high abilities. The measures adopted in this regard may fall within two different trends:

a) separate education: homogenous groups of students based on respective ability and learning level within one educational establishment;

b) inclusive education: student groups are mixed and the learning centre offers educational approaches adapted to suit the diversity of students in each group.

3.3.3 Currently, education systems in the EU tend to prefer the inclusive model. It aims to offer all students in the first stages of their schooling a common education in a school environment that caters for diversity, rather than establishing homogenous groups too soon. This approach is compatible with the fact that, during non-compulsory stages of education or when students are nearing the end of their secondary education and the start of their university studies, some Member States are trialling systems aimed at enhancing specific talents, or more homogenous group schemes aimed at highly able students and/or high academic achievers. As things stand at present, it seems that the likely trend in the future will be to maintain inclusive education during the first stages of school and open the way for homogenous groups in the more advanced or post-compulsory stages.

3.3.4 For students with high abilities, the specific educational measures that can be adopted within the educational establishment may be as follows (the ordinary measures are applicable to all students in general):

— **Ordinary measures:**

— Presentation of content with varying degrees of difficulty, flexible groups, variety of activities and extension of basic curriculum.

— Educational enhancement, based on the motivation and interest of the student in certain areas and organised by him/herself.

— **Less common measures:** These involve adapting the curriculum, extending or enhancing it for the student in question: individual curricular adaptation.

— **Exceptional measures:** These involve making the various levels and lessons more flexible by a form of fast-tracking: a student may be in the same class as older students. They are applied in very few cases – around 3 % of students with high abilities

3.3.5 Outside schools, highly able students may participate in activities that are planned but less regulated than school activities, and allow for contact with highly able students from other establishments. Such extracurricular activities are fairly widespread and are very varied in scope. They may be supported by States, public authorities and the EU.

3.3.6 These two forms of educational care – formal and non-formal education – are not mutually exclusive. Better care for highly able students should include both aspects: specific care within their own establishment and within school hours similar to that required by all those children with particular support needs, together with additional, extracurricular care which may be provided inside or outside the educational establishment.

3.3.7 At present, the big issue is the substantial improvement of educational care received by highly able students within their own establishment. This means improving initial and ongoing training of teaching staff when it comes to detecting and providing educational care for highly able students within the general context of catering for student diversity.

3.3.8 Unleashing the potential of all young people in the EU, particularly highly gifted young people, is not a matter solely for the education sector. It is also important to implement a social and economic policy that makes it possible to offer these people jobs and opportunities from an early age so that they may realise their potential. In this case, Europe has a crucial mission: to prevent the brain drain whereby more able people leave for other parts of the world in which to use their talents.

4. **Monitoring highly able students in the European context**

4.1 *Overview*

4.1.1 In recent years, various studies have sketched an overview of the situation for high intellectual abilities throughout the EU ([4]). They show the following:

— Overall, the studies identify the need to alter the practices of educational establishments in order to improve the care provided for the diversity of students, including those with high abilities.

— Legislation on education in the various countries takes into account the existence of students with high abilities, but there are significant variations when it comes to considering whether or not these students require specific measures for educational care.

— The criteria for diagnosing high abilities are gradually broadening, moving beyond the traditional approach which involves only evaluating intelligence. They now tend to include specific tests to assess creativity and originality, along with school, social and family reports from teachers and families.

— On the whole, care for highly able students tends to be dominated by out-of-school activities in the context of non-formal education, rather than activities within the curriculum or ordinary educational establishment during school hours. Specific competitions or contests for particular talents (science, technology, sports, music, etc.) tend to be more common than initiatives providing care for high abilities in general.

— There is much room for improvement in teacher training, both initial and ongoing, when it comes to detecting and caring for highly able students.

4.2 *Legislation and educational response*

4.2.1 In every EU country, there are private associations of professionals and/or families that provide extracurricular educational activities to foster the abilities of particularly gifted students. In some countries, activities are also promoted by or in cooperation with the relevant education authorities.

4.2.2 The range of educational responses aimed at students with high abilities in the EU countries is as follows:

— The legislation of almost all Member States includes some educational measures relating to these students. Some countries' legislation provides for general educational measures for all students but without distinguishing highly gifted or talented students from the rest: excellence is sought among all students.

— Most countries establish mixed-ability groups while aiming to provide care for students within each group. A number of countries stream students into groups based on ability and school results, although some of these only do so for sporting or artistic talents.

([4]) For details of the current scope of educational care for students with high abilities in the EU Member States, see:
'La atención a los alumnos con altas capacidades en la Unión Europea' (Care for students with high abilities in the EU), in *De todo un poco*, No 11, annual publication of the Programa de Enriquecimiento Educativo para Alumnos con Altas Capacidades de la Comunidad de Madrid, pp. 21-29, Madrid, 2009
Gifted Learners. A survey of educational policy and provision. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009.
Eurydice (2006), *Specific Educational Measures to promote all Forms of Giftedness at School in Europe* (Working Document). Brussels: Eurydice European Unit.
Monks, F.J., Pflüger, R, *Gifted Education in 21 European Countries: Inventory and Perspective*, University of Nijmegen, 2005.

— With regard to measures for increased flexibility or fast-tracking (i.e. the possibility for a student to move up to a school level above their age group), most countries allow for this in their legislation, but there is no uniform criterion for implementation. Some Member States allow for the early participation of highly able secondary-school students in specific university courses and projects.

4.3 *Teacher training*

4.3.1 Despite the difficult economic climate (which also affects the education system) and the challenges facing teachers in their daily work, specialised teacher training in this area needs to be improved, in terms of both initial and ongoing training.

4.3.2 Most countries in the EU include specific training for the provision of care for students with high abilities in the official syllabus for future teachers, either as a specific subject or as part of the general training on catering for student diversity.

4.3.3 When it comes to publicly provided ongoing training for teachers, only half of countries offer this within their ongoing teacher training plans. This official ongoing training coexists with that offered by certain private bodies.

4.3.4 In short, it is clear that the situation in the EU displays considerable room for improvement in the following areas:

— initial and ongoing training of teaching staff to improve teachers' perception of students with high abilities and facilitate their understanding of these student profiles, along with the methods to be used for their detection and targeted educational care;

— incorporating into teacher training the values of humanism, the reality of multiculturalism, the educational use of ICT and, finally, the encouragement of creativity, innovation and initiative;

— pooling of psychoeducational assessment procedures, along with those to assess social and family-related factors, which are used when detecting students with high intellectual abilities. This detection should be carried out at an early age, but it should also be possible to carry it out at later educational stages, including in the workplace of those who have already got a job;

— designing and implementing measures for educational care of students with high intellectual abilities or other exceptional characteristics, both inside and outside ordinary educational establishments in the context of non-formal education: educational enhancement programmes;

— designing and implementing mechanisms and procedures to facilitate lifelong learning for people with high intellectual abilities, particularly when it comes to accessing and attending university.

Brussels, 16 January 2013.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON