

I

(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

OPINIONS

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

523TH EESC PLENARY SESSION OF 22 AND 23 FEBRUARY 2017

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'High-quality education for all'

(exploratory opinion)

(2017/C 173/01)

Rapporteur: **Benjamin RIZZO**

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| Request by the Maltese presidency of the Council | 16.9.2016 |
| Legal basis | Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union |
| Section responsible | Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship |
| Adopted in section | 3.2.2017 |
| Adopted at plenary | 22.2.2017 |
| Plenary session No | 523 |
| Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions) | 207/1/5 |

1. Conclusions and recommendations

The EESC:

- 1.1. encourages Member States to take a stronger commitment in the field of high quality education for all to achieve the EU objectives for 2020 and the UN objectives for 2030;
- 1.2. stresses the importance of state-funded high quality education and training (E&T) for all whilst emphasising the relevance of educating citizens on human rights, their role as citizens and strengthening European values in all educational programmes of Member States;
- 1.3. pleads for a stronger support for early childhood education (decisive for language acquisition, socialisation, adaptation to primary education and further education) and lifelong learning (decisive for a successful integration in society and in the world of work);
- 1.4. highlights the need to create training opportunities for young school-leavers, low-skilled workers and migrant workers and to recognise the outcomes of non-formal and informal education;
- 1.5. finds that the future of work and digitalisation challenges are essential topics to which the EU and its Member States must give a key place in the political debate and in the social dialogue on high quality education for all;

1.6. encourages the EU and its Member States to seek more synergies and concerted EU-wide strategies in the field of education for all;

1.7. reminds the European Commission (EC) and its Member States that teachers and education staff need to be supported in their efforts to improve all aspects of their professional development to improve job performance. It therefore recommends investing in the qualification of teachers and trainers, striving to ensure a gender balance in recruitment, and providing stable work and good career conditions and salaries for all of them;

1.8. asks for a more effective use of the European Funds, especially the European Social Fund (ESF), and Horizon 2020, to support quality education and training, talent support, research and innovation.

2. General comments

2.1. The EESC is very pleased that the Maltese Presidency has chosen '**High quality education for all**' as an overarching theme and asked the EESC to produce an exploratory opinion on this issue. Europe should not forget the essential role played by high quality education for all in building up a European society committed to upholding fundamental rights and values. Malta aims to promote inclusion in diversity in formal and non-formal education through the provision of equitable and diverse learning routes. In this sense, Malta organised an education week in January 2017 focusing on 'equity and learning' and 'digital education'.

2.2. The EESC is also pleased that on 7 December the EC presented three communications under the title 'Youth Initiative' ⁽¹⁾. This opinion focuses on the communication 'Improving and Modernising Education: High Quality Education for All'. Moreover, as the representative of European civil society at EU level, the EESC expects to be consulted and to play an active role on any further developments related to these initiatives. As a first reaction, however, the EESC fears that the value of these initiatives could be lost when austerity measures still apply to many of our societies, hindering them to fully benefit from high quality education.

2.3. Although education remains a prerogative of national governments, the EESC believes that the EU should use its influence and financial capacity to help Member States invest more in high quality education for all.

3. Specific comments

3.1. Quality education

3.1.1. Quality education contributes to the development of free, critical, conscious, active and autonomous men and women, capable of participating in the progress of the societies in which they live and of understanding common values of freedom and solidarity. It also creates the foundation that allows people to master the challenges of the world of work.

3.1.2. The commitment to quality education requires concrete actions, such as:

- improving the support to early childhood education (decisive for language acquisition, socialisation, adaptation to primary education and further education) and lifelong learning (decisive for a successful integration in society and in the world of work);
- making sure education responds to the challenges of globalisation, digitalisation and the changes in the world of work;
- creating training opportunities for young school-leavers, low-skilled workers and migrant workers without neglecting digital literacy;
- ensuring that information selection skills are developed as part of the education process;
- recognising the outcomes of non-formal and informal education;
- promoting alliances between the most diverse educational actors, involving the whole educational community;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2016) 940 final, COM(2016) 941 final, and COM(2016) 942 final.

- improving and investing in the initial and in-service training for teachers and education staff;
- upgrading the teaching profession and provide better working conditions and salaries;
- ensuring that policies decided to cope with the economic crisis and sovereign debt do not jeopardise quality E&T;
- investing in better education infra-structure and tools, such as ICT;
- improving public investment in quality education, research and vocational training and continue to support and finance the Erasmus+ programme;
- making better use the European Funds, especially the European Social Fund (ESF), and Horizon 2020, to support quality E&T, research and innovation;
- strengthening EU-wide mobility opportunities for students, academics, teachers, trainers and researchers, who should be able to spend time in another Member State — this should apply not only to formal education but also to non-formal systems, vocational training and apprenticeships;
- seeking more EU-wide synergies and concerted strategies in the field of education; and
- promoting the cooperation and dialogue between companies and education and training systems and their providers with a view to identify skills needs and promote employment.

3.2. *Education and human rights*

3.2.1. The EESC believes that, while a main purpose of education is the development of people as stated above, training is a discipline and an activity more relevant to operational purposes, and closely related to the development of and insertion into the world of work. The EESC has already shown the differences and connections between education and training, which are certainly linked but have objectives of their own. In many opinions, the EESC has contributed to the recognition of education as a fundamental human right, a public good and a primary responsibility of governments.

3.2.2. The Declaration on 'Promoting citizenship, and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education' (signed by the Ministers of Education in Paris in March 2015, after the attacks committed in France and Denmark) states that the EU 'reaffirm[s] [the] determination to stand shoulder to shoulder in support of fundamental values that lie at the heart of the EU: respect for human dignity, freedom (including freedom of expression), democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect of human rights'.

3.2.3. Unfortunately, in 2016 violence from a range of backgrounds (including political extreme right groups espousing xenophobic and racist proposals, terrorism using religious arguments, and strong rejection of refugees escaping war and conflict) has once again had painful consequences. The education on human rights and for citizenship, as well as on EU values, should therefore be strengthened in all educational programmes of Member States.

3.2.4. In this sense, Member States must add new dimensions to education: its links to fundamental rights and to the future of work and must prepare for the cultural and functional changes resulting from environmental developments and ensure that training is suitable to the tasks and skills needed in a sustainable development economy.

3.2.5. Information literacy is one of the challenges facing modern education. Accessing information is a civic right, but making use of information is a complex matter. The ability to select, interpret and use information can and should be shaped by means of education, in the interests of both individuals and society. Information literacy is one of the hallmarks of high-quality education.

3.3. *The economic crisis, poverty, social exclusion*

3.3.1. A Eurostat report states that 'in 2015, around 25 million children or 26 % of the population aged 0 to 17, in the EU were at risk [...] [of poverty or social exclusion]. [...] In 2015 more than a third of children were at risk [of poverty or social exclusion] [...] in 6 Member States: Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Spain, and Italy'. The highest increase occurred in Greece (from 28,7 % in 2010 to 37,8 % in 2015, i.e. plus 9,1 percentage points). These worrying data clearly show the connection between the crisis and the rise in poverty.

3.3.2. The most recent EU reports on the education sector provide additional evidence on an issue reflected in many previous civil society analyses and statements: that poverty is closely tied to the socioeconomic and cultural background of families and social groups. Eurostat affirms that 'the proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU decreases with the education level of their parents. In 2015, almost 2/3 (65,5 %) of all children whose parents had a low education level (at the most, lower secondary education) were at risk of poverty [...] compared with 30,3 % of children residing with parents who had a medium education level [...] and 10,6 % of children with parents with a higher education level'.

3.3.3. Educational poverty, or the share of young people failing to reach minimum standards in education, is one of the greatest challenges in Europe today. On the other hand, because of the economic crisis and strict budgetary and fiscal constraints, the quality of E&T systems has been deteriorating, increasing the risk of poverty and exclusion and jeopardising the principle of public high quality education for all.

3.3.4. Although some European countries have decided to cut education budgets, reduce staff salaries, limit staff recruitment, stop building schools or not to allocate resources sufficient to maintain safe and liveable infrastructure of educational establishments, this trend should be reversed. In 2014, public expenditure on education was merely 1,1 % in real terms, and ten Member States reduced their spending in 2014 compared to 2013 ⁽²⁾. The EESC therefore urges national governments to reconsider and modify the austerity programmes that could severely affect the implementation of commitments made at European and international level in the field of education, such as the 2020 and 2030 Agendas.

3.4. Education and the future of work

3.4.1. The future of work is an essential topic which must be accorded a key place in political debate and social dialogue on high quality education. Moreover, tectonic shifts are reshaping the ways in which work is performed. The result is that, in spite of opening new opportunities in turning innovations into new jobs, the world of work is now characterised by high levels of unpredictability for both workers and businesses. And, while combined with new positive opportunities, the transitions that the digital revolution is bringing magnify the sense of unpredictability and complexity still further. As stated in the first Education and Training Monitor developed by the Juncker Commission, 'Equipping people for employment is only part of the picture. Education has an equally important role in creating a better society'. However, nowadays, even the most qualified workers can lose their jobs. Although crucial, education and training *per se* no longer give any guarantee of a good, stable, well-paid job. Also inequalities in the labour market seem to have become a concern that needs to be adequately addressed.

3.4.2. Vocational education and training (VET) is of increasing importance to fight unemployment and must be improved and made more accessible and relevant. Adequate human and financial resources must be allocated to ensure the quality of education outcomes and the employability of the people concerned.

3.4.3. An EC evaluation report of investments under the European Social Fund (ESF) during the 2007-2013 period shows that by the end of 2014, at least 9,4 million European residents found a job and 8,7 million gained a qualification or certificate. Other positive results, such as increased skills levels, were reported by 13,7 million participants. This positive news should encourage Member States to continuously fight unemployment in Europe that is still high in many of them.

3.4.4. The EESC also recommends to the EU and its Member States to invest more in research and innovation to create new and better jobs for the future.

3.4.5. The gender pay gap still exists. Commissioner Věra Jourová said in November 2015: 'Women continue to work nearly two months for free every year, because of an average hourly wage for women 16,4 % inferior to that of men. Equality between men and women is one of the fundamental values of the European Union, but this day reminds us that it is not one of its fundamental realities.' Given the feminisation of the education sector, salaries should be reviewed and career opportunities improved.

⁽²⁾ Education & Training Monitor 2015.

3.5. Public education

3.5.1. Member States must reaffirm the role of public education in achieving equality and social cohesion. When considering the most recent EU data on poverty and risk of social exclusion, the importance of public education to build more equal societies cannot be understated.

3.5.2. High quality education should be provided equitably on a not-for-profit basis. Governments have primarily the responsibility to ensure adequate resources for universally accessible education, as they have committed to do at international and European levels. Investment in education, especially in public education, should become a political priority.

3.5.3. As not all workers have the tools to be resilient to societal, personal and professional risks, access to public, high quality up- and re-skilling opportunities and to adequate welfare protection throughout one's life is key. As the representative of civil society at EU level, the EESC stresses the need to strengthen and to better fund public facilities for training unemployed and migrant workers.

3.5.4. The EESC also finds that the social partners and the education community should be given monitoring powers and assess the effectiveness of public spending in education.

3.6. Social dialogue and collective bargaining

3.6.1. Across Europe, social dialogue in the education sector is facing a variety of challenges, due to internal and external factors. More immediate economic concerns have caused social dialogue to slip down the policy agenda. The lack of effective social dialogue is reflected in the fact that decisions affecting education staff and the school community are often taken outside formal consultations with the social partners. In many countries, the scope of bargaining has narrowed at the very moment that it should be expanding to deal with the many new challenges faced by the education community.

3.6.2. The EESC therefore encourages Member States and social partners to strengthen the correlation between the national and the European social dialogue and to discuss how to broaden the scope of collective bargaining. The European social dialogue in the education sector is crucial for meeting the Europe 2020 strategy and Agenda 2030 goals, as it brings together European employers and employees in this field so that they can agree on how to meet the challenges facing the sector. The whole education community (parents, students, civil society organisations, etc.) should also be involved.

3.7. ICT in education

3.7.1. In recent years, the world has shifted from a largely production-driven economy to a more services-oriented one. Knowledge creation has become a critical value factor for both production and services.

3.7.2. Information and communication technology in the globalised world has changed economic integration and interdependence at all levels. Moreover, the digital transformation is generating major changes in industries and services. This includes the transition from traditional employment to digital jobs. ICT is used in many ways. It is also the support for social and/or political virtual networks. In this way, ICT plays an increasing role in the socialisation of children and young people.

3.7.3. Although ICT offers opportunities in many areas, it opens the door to real dangers, such as cybercrime, hazardous and harmful content, increasing commercialisation of services, as well as enabling technological surveillance and misuse of personal data. Personal data protection and information security in the education field would need to be dealt with by a European strategy. Moreover, several European countries have national strategies in place to foster the use of ICT in different areas, including a specific strategy devoted to education, but large implementation gaps remain.

3.7.4. The introduction of digital devices in education is a key topic for the education community and society. The EC has emphasised in its Digital Agenda and the Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2020 the need for innovative teaching and learning approaches in the Member States to enhance digital skills and prepare workers for the digital jobs of the future. Research studies and reports from the OECD and Unesco also point in the same direction: the inherent need to ensure that education establishments are equipped to use ICT in teaching and to enhance teaching competences regarding the pedagogical use of ICT at all levels of education to shape the future.

3.7.5. The integration of new technology in education could foster the skills that are necessary for adapting to fast-changing technology and preparing students for lifelong learning and active democratic citizenship. However, while ICT in education has the potential to improve teaching and learning, it also presents many challenges for teachers and students, as the ones mentioned in this opinion

3.7.6. Finally, it should be noted that, if the EU wants to maintain a leading position in the field of higher education and scientific research, it has to strengthen its investment in talent support, research and innovation.

3.8. *Teachers, the architects of the future*

3.8.1. It is well known that teachers play a key role in the success or failure of education initiatives and programmes. The EESC calls on educational authorities and establishments to provide continuous formal pedagogical and technical support to teachers, to help them adapt to new digital systems and to avoid the use of ICT resulting in the deterioration of working conditions. The EESC recommends investing in the qualification of trainers and teachers, striving to ensure a gender balance in recruitment by choosing the best in their professional category, and providing stable work and good career conditions and salaries.

3.8.2. As national educational technology standards are expected to change dramatically, education staff representatives should be consulted when national education authorities are planning new strategies and programmes that challenge their daily work. Subjects such as media capture, media manipulation, media presentation and publishing, website development, data entry, handling databases, information gathering, collaborative environment and file sharing should be integrated into the initial and in-service training. It is essential that every teacher is trained to acquire these skills and competences.

3.8.3. The EESC also recommends that Member States facilitate the mobility opportunities for teachers and education staff when travelling to different Member States, while preserving their social security and pension rights in order to make teaching and training more attractive professions for younger generations.

Brussels, 22 February 2017.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Georges DASSIS
