

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education

(COM(2017) 247 final)

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on school development and excellent teaching for a great start in life

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(for/against/abstentions)	

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. While the EESC welcomes the initiatives and agrees with their principles, it would like to use this opportunity to express its views on the importance of providing the necessary means to support the improvement of education systems in Europe to achieve high quality education for all, as well as on the importance of improving the ability of education to meet societal challenges and prepare students effectively for quality life and jobs. By leveraging its own values, Europe can and must play a leading innovative role in building a sustainable and inclusive economy. An economy of this kind should be capable of enhancing competitiveness and safeguarding the future of its particular social model. Cooperation in education gives real meaning to the very concept of the EU, and promotes the image of the 'community', i.e. the EU, as something constructive.

1.2. Given the current political climate in Europe, the EESC calls on the Commission and the Member States to include the need to value cultural diversity and tolerance in education policies as another area for fostering active citizenship within the scope of EU objectives aimed at promoting EU fundamental values. We are all responsible for educating people and making them truly aware of common European history and values, as well as of the importance of tolerance and human rights.

1.3. The EESC believes that in order to be able to respond to the increasing challenges of today, a more ambitious initiative is needed, one that would lead to a more holistic education strategy that changes the current paradigm, in order to support our children and youth and provide quick solutions to existing challenges.

1.4. Improving the status of teachers and school heads and supporting them is fundamental in improving education. Further training needs to be provided not only to teachers and school heads but also to the real-life educators of children and young people outside the educational setting, e.g. their parents, the community and non-formal education providers. It is important to build alliances with these groups.

1.5. More specific suggestions should be issued to Member States regarding education and teacher support, including on improving the school environment as a component of their working conditions and learners' learning conditions. Some suggestions could be formulated in the context of the European semester, as part of the country-specific recommendations.

1.6. In view of the upcoming high-level education summit planned for early 2018, which will be hosted by the Commission, the EESC strongly encourages the Member States to take a significant step forward and establish — including through the use of effective social and civil dialogues — the education, training and lifelong learning systems that will provide learners with a promising future in Europe.

1.7. The EESC considers the following two elements to be the cornerstone for improving and modernising education systems: the availability of sufficient, equitably allocated funding, and coordinated governance in the framework of high-quality and effective social dialogue. This should be given greater recognition in future debates. Educational resources should not only focus on performance, but also on inclusiveness, for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and for refugees.

1.8. The EU must invest more in education and training, research and innovation by increasing funds allocated to the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes and their planned successors. This can increase the number of jobs in the future and open new opportunities.

1.9. Furthermore, the EESC would like to highlight the importance of involving the social partners and other civil society organisations effectively in this process.

1.10. Although the focus of the communication is on schools and higher education, cooperation and links between formal, non-formal and informal learning and the validation of their outcomes must also be addressed.

1.11. The EESC stresses the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to entrepreneurship. Defined entrepreneurial learning outcomes for all educators are needed, in order to introduce effective entrepreneurial learning methodologies into the classroom. Developing social projects inside or outside schools is an ideal opportunity to acquire these skills and the necessary mindset, and also helps build better links with other learning environments.

1.12. The EESC believes that the wider purpose of education lies within the balance and close cooperation between the STEM subjects and the social sciences and humanities. The EESC therefore calls for a more interdisciplinary approach to education and lifelong learning that is centred on partnerships and flexible pathways that go beyond a single level of education and particular field of study.

2. Summary of Commission initiatives

2.1. Following its Communication on improving and modernising education (7 December 2016), the European Commission has launched a new youth initiative on schools and higher education entitled 'Strategy for high quality, inclusive, and future-oriented education' on 30 May 2017. The package comprises two renewed EU agendas to modernise education, one in schools and the other in higher education.

2.2. With regard to schools, evidence from the Member States has identified three areas where action is needed and where EU support can help to address important challenges:

- raising the quality and inclusiveness of schools,
- supporting excellent teachers and school leaders,
- improving the governance of school education systems.

2.3. The Commission is proposing to complement measures taken by the Member States in these three areas by supporting mutual learning, strengthening evidence for what works in education and providing assistance with national reforms in those Member States that desire it. Examples of such support include: boosting competence development and intercultural learning through school partnerships, mobility and e-Twinning projects under Erasmus+; strengthening peer learning in the career and professional development of teachers and school leaders; and setting up a new support mechanism to help Member States seeking assistance in designing and implementing education reforms.

2.4. The renewed higher education strategy builds on the 2011 modernisation agenda. In the communication, the Commission sets out its plans for four key areas:

- ensuring graduates leave higher education with the skill sets that both they and the modern economy need,
- building inclusive higher education systems,
- making sure higher education institutions contribute to innovation in the rest of the economy,
- supporting higher education institutions and governments in making the best use of the human and financial resources available.

2.5. Finally, in order to ensure that higher education can help boost growth and job creation, universities need to tailor curricula to the current and anticipated needs of the economy and society, and prospective students need up-to-date, solid information that will help them decide what courses to choose. This is why the Commission also presented a parallel proposal for a Council recommendation on tracking graduates, as part of the new Skills Agenda for Europe, which will also cover graduates of vocational education and training programmes in addition to higher education graduates. This should encourage and support Member State authorities in improving the quality and availability of information on how graduates progress in their careers or further education after finishing their studies.

3. General comments on the new EU education strategy

3.1. The EESC welcomes the initiatives and would like to express its views on the importance of providing the necessary means to support the improvement of education systems in Europe to achieve high quality education for all, as well as on the importance of improving the ability of education to meet societal challenges and prepare students effectively for quality life and jobs. It approves of the emphasis given to early childhood education, investment in teachers' education, promotion of cooperation among different stakeholders, improving school governance, synergies with research and the overall focus on social inclusion.

3.2. While it has been broadly emphasised that education is a key vector for reducing socioeconomic inequalities and promoting social inclusion ⁽¹⁾, in the recent Commission recommendation for the European Pillar of Social Rights and the 2015 Paris Declaration ⁽²⁾ it was noted that inequalities are continuing to rise in most EU countries. Changes taking place around the world affecting work, skills demand and societies have never been so rapid; the EU should therefore encourage the Member States to adapt their education systems to this new reality. Continuous evaluation of skills mismatches and labour market outcomes should help in this regard. To build a society of truly equal opportunities, it is also necessary to make curricula and teaching practices more flexible, innovative and holistic by taking stock of the many examples of best practice that have been highlighted in the past years.

⁽¹⁾ Education is a key component of recent EU declarations: EU Social Pillar (April 2017); New skills agenda for Europe (June 2016); Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe (April 2017); Rome Declaration (March 2017).

⁽²⁾ An informal meeting of education ministries in March 2015 in Paris adopted the Declaration on 'Promoting citizenship and common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination in education'.

3.3. That said, the EESC is keen to note that education is a common good and should remain a key instrument in promoting the public interest by targeting investment to reduce the private and public costs of a lack of education in many fields such as preventing violence, improving health through sport and promoting well-being, raising awareness about climate change and guaranteeing social peace in increasingly diverse societies. In this respect, education reforms should not only aim at transmitting tomorrow's skill sets, competences and knowledge that young people need in order to access the labour market, but also at enhancing the ability of learners to respond to urgent societal issues that affect the everyday lives of European citizens.

3.4. The transition from one level of education to another and cooperation between different education providers in both formal and non-formal settings require particular attention in the Commission's planned strategy. While the EESC welcomes the emphasis on building inclusive and connected higher education systems and encouraging schools to develop better links and cooperation with higher education in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), the Committee believes that the wider purpose of education lies within the balance and close cooperation between the STEM subjects and the social sciences and humanities. The EESC therefore calls for a more interdisciplinary approach to education and lifelong learning that is centred on partnerships and flexible pathways that go beyond a single level of education and particular field of study. Such an approach would also help combat various inequalities, e.g. gender inequality in STEM subjects and science in general, as it would eliminate stereotypical views on what is more appropriate and/or common based on gender, race and other personal traits.

3.5. The Committee once again ⁽³⁾ calls upon the Commission to take a proactive role in introducing more innovative solutions in the fields of education and skills development, as well as in monitoring and promoting the practices and innovative approaches already in place among the Member States. The EESC strongly believes that now is the time for a genuine paradigm shift in the goals and functioning of the education and training sector, as well as in the understanding of its place and role in society, and for recognition of the fact that education itself is a factor in productivity. A proactive EU level is a key element here in shaping better education for tomorrow.

3.6. As the EESC has already stated in one of its previous opinions, 'the mobilisation of all stakeholders and support for creating "learning partnerships" in society, involving schools, businesses, town councils, social partners, civil society organisations, youth NGOs, youth and other community workers, parents and school students in the design and implementation of "curricula" is crucial [...] for paradigm change in education' ⁽⁴⁾.

3.7. Right from their early school years, young people must be assisted in developing competence portfolios that do not only refer to their knowledge, but also to their skills, innovative capacity and creativity, their critical spirit and their awareness of common European history. These competence profiles should also devote ample scope to their various digital skills, their interpersonal and teamwork experiences, and to their ability to acknowledge various cultures. This should be achieved with the support of their educators and youth workers.

3.8. The original name of the initiatives ('youth initiative') was sending a wrong message, as it seemed to be only targeting young people whereas formal education systems increasingly receive adult learners. It is regrettable that 'adults' are barely mentioned in the higher education communication, while higher education can play a key role in lifelong learning at all ages, and also to update the skills, competences and knowledge of employed and unemployed people.

3.9. The key to improving and modernising education systems is to ensure sufficient, equitably allocated funding and coordinated governance in the framework of high-quality and effective social dialogue. The Commission does not sufficiently acknowledge this in its working documents, and does not place enough emphasis on the fact that resources in education should not only focus on performance, but also on the inclusion of individual learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and on the integration of refugees. Furthermore, it barely acknowledges the importance of consulting and involving different stakeholders in this process, in particular civil society organisations.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 173, 31.5.2017, p. 45.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 214, 8.7.2014, p. 31.

4. Specific comments on the new EU education strategy

In response to the two EC initiatives, and to EU and Member State policies more generally, the EESC will focus here on the following three cross-cutting priorities for schools and higher education.

4.1. Basic hard skills are necessary, but so too are soft and cross-cutting skills, competences and knowledge.

4.1.1. The EESC stresses the importance for the Commission to ensure that Member States adopt a holistic definition of learners' needs, i.e. including hard and soft skills as well as competences and interdisciplinary knowledge. These three aspects should not only cover the capacities needed for work, but also embrace the broader purpose of pursuing the personal development of all individuals throughout their lives. Education improvements, especially in higher education systems, therefore also need to focus on how to better foster active citizenship, youth empowerment, lifelong learning, and knowledge about how the EU works and the benefits it provides. It is worth reminding ourselves that education cannot tackle socioeconomic disparities on its own, as synergies with complementary social and employment policies are a prerequisite for a more sustainable solution.

4.1.2. Particular attention should be given to the development of so-called 'soft skills', as employers increasingly value these and they are also helpful outside of work contexts. The EESC therefore encourages measures such as those specified in the Commission communication: projects to assess creativity, problem-solving, collaboration⁽⁵⁾, teamwork and critical thinking. Policymakers need to be given adequate support and training to understand the overall dimension of these skills.

4.1.3. While the EESC welcomes the support for cooperation between universities and the world of work, the latter should not be restricted to the business sector alone. Building partnerships between businesses and educational institutions should not be justified purely by the criterion of whether or not young people are 'directly employable'. Businesses must be in a position to fully harness human potential, by mobilising the right skills and making the new opportunities provided by the digital revolution available to all age groups. Businesses should also support young people in pursuing training once they enter the world of work: education is a continuous process that cannot satisfy every need in the limited number of years of formal education.

4.1.4. However, as the EESC has already pointed out, there is a need to 'encourage the introduction into schools of dual systems of education and training that combine classroom learning with workplace experience, raising awareness among education authorities and businesses of the importance of such initiatives'⁽⁶⁾. Work experience for school students and closer links between schools, industry, universities and research are crucial in order to create skilled, sustainable youth employment.

4.1.5. Despite the need for 'hard skills', economics cannot dictate the direction of (higher) education. In other words, initiatives such as system-level graduate tracking should ensure that higher education programmes and curricula are not based on instrumentalised educational outcomes, such as wages or graduate employment levels. Some Member States already have their own tracking system, so the potential EU-wide new system should unite them and in any case must avoid being used to justify austerity measures in humanities and social science curricula.

4.2. Supporting teachers for high-quality teaching and lifelong learning

4.2.1. In the 'digital age of education', the use of technology in education has to be beneficial for the learning process: for instance, while learning to code is not an end in itself, learners have to understand the logic of coding and acquire a skillset needed to use evolving technological means in the learning and life environments.

⁽⁵⁾ Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions, Report of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, European Commission, June 2013.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 327, 12.11.2013, p. 58.

4.2.2. 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. Therefore, digital literacy needs to be strengthened, thus giving every person the right tools to integrate in the future world of work. ICT has moved to all levels of industry and services and therefore must form an integral part of lifelong learning.

4.2.3. Improvements in digital education should also help young people differentiate more clearly between information and knowledge, develop critical thinking and adequate media literacy, and be able, for instance, to recognise fake news or protect their online privacy.

4.2.4. Although the focus of the communication is on schools and higher education, cooperation and links between formal, non-formal and informal learning and validation of their outcomes have not been sufficiently addressed, as underlined in the 2012 Council conclusions ⁽⁷⁾ on 'Partnership and flexible pathways for lifelong skills development'. Even today, only half of EU Member States have established a comprehensive lifelong learning strategy ⁽⁸⁾. In this regard, technologies can also be beneficial with regard to diversifying approaches to education.

4.2.5. The Commission has been focusing for years on developing EU networks and promoting cooperation for best practice exchange and peer learning. However, it would also be interesting to measure the extent to which educators actually endorse these tools and mechanisms. It is very likely that many teachers and educators remain unaware of all the support and financial and training resources available to them at EU level. Improving capacity-building and working conditions, including salaries for teachers, should be a priority for the Member States.

4.2.6. Following the Commission's recommendations, the Member States must facilitate lifelong learning for educators and teachers, and must also enhance their mobility, for instance through Erasmus+ programmes. Specific attention must be given to improving participatory aspects of teaching as this has proven to be a very good pedagogical practice enabling learners to acquire knowledge and develop certain cross-cutting skills such as communication skills. This would constitute a remarkable shift from teacher-centred education towards learner-centred teaching, where a teacher becomes more a facilitator of learning.

4.3. Entrepreneurial learning through social projects

4.3.1. Education must enhance the key competences, skills and attitudes that are needed in order to thrive in life after completing formal education, for example team work and project management. This new set of skills would not only help to increase employability, it would also improve the ability of future adults to create their own jobs individually and collectively. Action learning and experience-based learning are alternative approaches to learning that may increase the ability to retain knowledge and are more helpful in developing practical skills as opposed to expertise in a particular subject.

4.3.2. The EESC stresses the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to entrepreneurship, making beneficial use of the new EntreComp framework ⁽⁹⁾. Developing social projects inside or outside schools is an ideal opportunity to acquire these skills and the necessary mindset, and also helps build better links with other learning environments. In this regard, the support of the European Solidarity Corps initiative for young people in schools and higher education must be a key action for Member States. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in social entrepreneurship, which is one way of meeting young people's aspirations for more meaningful jobs.

⁽⁷⁾ Commission staff working document on Partnership and flexible pathways for lifelong learning skills development, accompanying the Communication from the Commission on Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socioeconomic outcomes, November 2012.

⁽⁸⁾ Commission staff working document, accompanying the [...] Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) — New priorities for European cooperation in education and training, August 2015.

⁽⁹⁾ European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework
<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/entrecomp-entrepreneurship-competence-framework>.

4.3.3. Entrepreneurship is a powerful driver of economic growth and job creation. Attention should be particularly focused on the development of entrepreneurial skills. As the EESC has already pointed out, entrepreneurship education across Europe, across the curriculum and as part of life-long learning still requires real commitment on the part of decision-makers. Ambition, creativity and entrepreneurship must be appreciated in their own right and be promoted, and should not be confused with business activity or profit-making. Creativity develops through learning in formal and informal systems. Educators need to be fully involved to ensure the correct message is delivered. Teachers may be adverse to a narrow definition of entrepreneurship where this is taken to mean starting a business, but may be more receptive to a broad concept representing a key competence for life. An 'entrepreneurial staircase' to develop activities and teaching can be used to bring the entrepreneurial 'spirit' into the classroom ⁽¹⁰⁾.

4.3.4. Whether or not they go on to set up businesses or social enterprises, young people who benefit from entrepreneurial learning develop business knowledge and essential skills and attitudes, including creativity, initiative, tenacity, teamwork, understanding of risk and a sense of responsibility. This is the entrepreneurial mind-set that helps entrepreneurs transform ideas into action and also significantly increases employability. Defined entrepreneurial learning outcomes for all educators are needed in order to introduce effective entrepreneurial learning methodologies into the classroom. Member States should therefore foster entrepreneurial skills through new and creative ways of teaching and learning from primary school onwards, alongside a focus from secondary to higher education on the possibility of setting up a business as a career option. Real-world experience, through problem-based learning and enterprise links, should be embedded across all disciplines and tailored to all levels of education.

Brussels, 19 October 2017.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 48, 15.2.2011, p. 45.