

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Modernising school and higher education

(2018/C 164/05)

Rapporteur:	Csaba Borboly (RO/EPP), President of Harghita County Council
Reference documents:	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 — school development and excellent teaching for a great start in life
	COM(2017) 248 final
	Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates
	COM(2017) 249 final

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMENDMENTS

Amendment 1

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Recital (1)

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
The employability of graduates leaving education and training is a matter of concern in many Member States, in particular because the employment rate of recent higher education graduates in the Union has not fully recovered after the 2008 financial crisis and the employment situation of graduates of vocational education and training programmes varies across Member States.	The employability of graduates leaving education and training is a matter of concern in many Member States, in particular because the employment rate of recent higher education graduates in the Union has not fully recovered after the 2008 financial crisis and the employment situation of graduates of vocational education and training programmes varies across Member States and regions and often depends on the geographical location. The specific context of the outermost regions should also be taken into account, given that they have some of the highest unemployment rates in Europe.

Reason

In addition to the discrepancies between Member States, it is important also to take account of regional disparities.

Amendment 2

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Recital (6)

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Although many Member States are developing systems for tracking, the exchange of knowledge, good practice and mutual learning is limited.	Although many Member States and local and regional authorities are developing systems for tracking, the exchange of knowledge, good practice and mutual learning is limited.

Reason

It is not only the Member States that are developing systems for tracking; these are also being developed by local and regional authorities to promote employment in certain zones and/or regions.

Amendment 3

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Recital (9)

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Member States have called for action at Union level, aimed at improving the flow of information about employability, skills mismatches and labour market needs. In particular, the 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) proposes the promotion of the relevance of higher education to the labour market and society, including through better intelligence and anticipation about labour market needs and outcomes, for example tracking the career of graduates.	Member States have called for action at Union level, aimed at improving the flow of information about employability, skills mismatches and labour market needs at the highest disaggregation level possible . In particular, the 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) proposes the promotion of the relevance of higher education to the labour market and society, including through better intelligence and anticipation about labour market needs and outcomes, for example tracking the career of graduates.

Reason

The maximum possible disaggregation level will enable the development of more refined policies that are in line with the needs identified.

Amendment 4

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Recital (10)

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>Member States also committed themselves to ensuring continuous information and feedback loops in the Riga Conclusions of 2015 on a new set of medium-term deliverables in the field of VET for the period 2015 — 2020, through actions such as the use of data on VET graduate employability and a combination of data on learning, labour market entry and career, developing capacities of actors at national level to use graduate data for adapting curricula, occupational profiles and the content of VET qualifications to new economic and technical requirements.</p>	<p>Member States also committed themselves to ensuring continuous information and feedback loops in the Riga Conclusions of 2015 on a new set of medium-term deliverables in the field of VET for the period 2015 — 2020, through actions such as the use of data on VET graduate employability and a combination of data on learning, labour market entry and career, developing capacities of actors at national, regional and local level to use graduate data for adapting curricula, occupational profiles and the content of VET qualifications to new economic and technical requirements.</p>

Reason

Regional and local actors currently also play an important role in education and the employment market.

Amendment 5

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 1

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
(a) the collection of relevant administrative data from education, tax and social security databases;	(a) the collection of relevant administrative data from education, tax and social security databases, while ensuring that this does not entail an additional financial burden on local and regional authorities;

Reason

The new administrative tasks entailed by this measure must not mean an increase in budgetary needs going beyond what is necessary to achieve the intended results.

Amendment 6

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 1

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
(c) the possibility for public authorities to link, on an anonymised basis, data from different sources, in order to build a composite picture of graduate outcomes.	(c) the possibility for public authorities to link, within and across borders and on an anonymised basis, data from different sources, in order to build a composite picture of graduate outcomes.

Reason

Given the increasing learner mobility, building a composite picture of graduate outcomes requires having access to data beyond that of a single Member State.

Amendment 7

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 2

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>Collect data that includes:</p> <p>a) the following quantitative data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) socio-biographical and socioeconomic information, ii) study intensity, iii) study method, iv) qualification(s), v) credits received, vi) field of study, vii) transition to employment or further education and training, viii) earnings, ix) type of contract, x) employment status, xi) occupation, professional status and/or activity, xii) geographical and/or sectoral mobility; <p>b) the following qualitative data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) relevance of study to employment, ii) participation in volunteering or civic engagement activities, iii) career progression and satisfaction, iv) perceptions of the quality and relevance of their education and training experience. 	<p>Collect data at the highest disaggregation level that includes:</p> <p>a) the following quantitative data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) socio-biographical and socioeconomic information, ii) study intensity, iii) study method, iv) qualification(s), v) credits received, vi) field of study, vii) transition to employment or further education and training, viii) earnings, ix) type of contract, x) employment status, xi) occupation, professional status and/or activity, xii) geographical and/or sectoral mobility; <p>b) the following qualitative data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) relevance of study to employment, ii) participation in volunteering or civic engagement activities, iii) career progression and satisfaction, iv) perceptions of the quality and relevance of their education and training experience.

Reason

Using the maximum possible disaggregation level will provide a much clearer picture of the issues faced.

Amendment 8

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 3

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>Longitudinal graduate surveys</p> <p>3. Encourage a high, representative and continued response rate to longitudinal graduate surveys, including the tracking of graduates who have migrated, whether for the purposes of education and training or on completion of their education and training.</p>	<p>Longitudinal graduate surveys</p> <p>3. Encourage a high, representative and continued response rate to longitudinal graduate surveys, including the tracking of graduates who have migrated, whether for the purposes of education and training or on completion of their education and training, <i>and of graduates who have returned after having completed any level of higher education or vocational education and training in another Member State or any other third country, especially those bordering the EU.</i></p>

Reason

In an increasingly interconnected EU labour market and against a backdrop of high learner mobility, improving skills acquisition and employability is a goal pursued by the educational systems of all Member States. In this sense, the tracking of graduates must go beyond national borders.

Amendment 9

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 5

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>e) contributing to policy development at both national and Union level.</p>	<p>e) contributing to policy development at national, regional and local as well as Union level.</p>

Reason

Local and regional authorities are important players in the field of education and in the context of intervention on the labour market.

Amendment 10

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 9

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Provides capacity building support in vocational education and training, as needed, for the establishment of graduate tracking systems, based on good practices identified through a comprehensive mapping across Member States, and facilitates cooperation among authorities, providers of vocational education and training and guidance services with regards to the use of graduate tracking data.	Provides capacity building support in vocational education and training, as needed, for the establishment of graduate tracking systems, based on good practices identified through a comprehensive mapping across Member States at their different national, regional and/or local levels , and facilitates cooperation among the various authorities, providers of vocational education and training and guidance services with regards to the use of graduate tracking data.

Reason

The key role played by the various authorities of each Member State deserves to be recognised.

Amendment 11

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates

Paragraph 11

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
Ensures that data collected and related analyses are made available for use by Member States and stakeholders, including through existing online EU tools.	Ensures that data collected and related analyses are made available for use by Member States and local and regional authorities, but also by stakeholders, where the protection of personal data is guaranteed and where the provision of such access is justified by the general interest or research or strategic planning needs , including through existing online EU tools.

Reason

While it goes without saying that such access must be guaranteed for local and regional authorities, it should be limited for stakeholders, depending on the purpose for which the data is to be used.

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. deems the Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation a welcome but timid first step when it comes to European cooperation, considering that the availability of comparable information on graduate (un)employment across the EU is crucial in order to be able to address, inter alia, the brain drain within and across European regions. Such availability would also enable the Commission to formulate its policy recommendations in a uniform way, as part of a global approach;

2. welcomes the fact that the Commission is continuing to pay particular attention to questions related to developments in the field of education. Education is part of Europe's historical heritage and is one of the main vectors of competitiveness for the Member States and regions, as well as of equal opportunities, social mobility and European citizenship;

3. offers its support to the European Commission in the framework of this process, which, while fully acknowledging the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems, could reinforce the compatibility and interoperability of the various European systems of school and higher education and training; in this sense, considers that the proposed action as it stands does not appear to raise any subsidiarity concerns and underlines the importance of respecting the proportionality principle to ensure that no new financial or administrative burdens are generated;

4. welcomes the fact that, in its Communication, the European Commission indicates that giving all young people the opportunity to acquire the whole range of key competences would be a significant step towards equal opportunities for EU citizens, thus taking up a proposal put forward for the first time in the European Committee of the Regions' opinion on European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018);

5. emphasises the need for access to educational opportunities not to be determined by family income, the student's origin or mother tongue, and for equality to be at the centre of European school and higher education systems allowing all EU citizens to reach their potential. The Committee welcomes the Commission's approach, which recognises the need to step up investment in the education and training sector, inter alia, in order to address school and university drop-out, so that local and regional authorities can guarantee everyone the right to an education, sweeping aside barriers which are a limiting factor in the choice of and primarily the ability to take up education paths;

6. points out that the idea of the Citizens' University can become a reality only if the Union and the Member States genuinely and appropriately consult the local and regional authorities when drawing up their higher education policies; calls on the European Commission to give a new impetus to the Bologna process and to take the necessary measures in certain areas, e.g. on rapid and even automatic recognition and equivalence of degrees and vocational qualifications, including doctorates and other academic titles;

7. sees digitalisation as an opportunity to address many educational challenges, as well as a fundamental element in the modernisation of the education system. It can facilitate, inter alia:

- more personalised and inclusive teaching, especially for mixed-abilities classes
- distance learning, e.g. to reach the most remote or isolated areas, or those groups that are harder to reach
- the documentation of students' progress, facilitating the assessment work of teachers and reducing red tape;

8. draws attention to the fact that, with regard to the modernisation of school and higher education, it is not enough to discuss the objectives, particularly given that the planning of EU funds for the next programming period is already in progress and that, in this respect, emphasis should be placed on the need to provide for specific support after 2020 for projects and measures for the development of training programmes and school and higher educational infrastructure in the less developed regions;

9. stresses that equal opportunities with regard to access to higher education, including for students from less favoured, outlying or outermost regions or minority communities, can be better safeguarded once the publicly funded education system to which they have access is efficient, effective and inclusive;

10. points out that opportunity to travel and cultural exchange in the EU (via the Erasmus programme for example) can enrich students educational experience and help foster a sense of EU citizenship; in this regard, notes that equal opportunities in terms of mobility must be guaranteed, in order for it to be accessible on equal terms to all young people regardless of where they live;

11. considers that it would be worthwhile promoting the development of complementary training systems and other catch-up programmes to facilitate the transition from one level of education to the next, while appropriately promoting the exchange of best practice in this area;

12. suggests that the proposal for more results-orientated financing of higher educational institutions be reconsidered in order to take due account of the special challenges facing universities of regional and local importance, and particularly higher educational institutions attended by small numbers of students from minority communities and whose disappearance would cause considerable cultural, community and economic damage;

13. draws attention to the fact that new measures are needed for the internationalisation of higher education, particular as regards joint European and international exchange and mobility programmes, degrees and the extension of Erasmus to candidate countries and neighbouring third countries, while respecting quality requirements;

14. points out that at present the funds available for the internationalisation of education and vocational training systems preceding higher education are insufficient, and therefore considers that there is a need to systematically mobilise new European and national, as well as regional and local resources;

15. given that, in the current higher education and training system, there is often a mismatch between the preparedness, qualifications and skills of graduates, on the one hand, and the needs of the labour market and conditions of employability on the other, recommends that efforts be made to introduce into higher education needs-based training courses which, for example, make it possible for a student to choose freely between courses offered at different universities with the involvement and consultation of all relevant stakeholders, including local employers. Once students have completed these training courses, they can be awarded the credits equivalent to those obtained through regular higher education courses;

16. endorses a dual learning system linking the education and vocational training available with the local environment and taking into account the specific needs of the local labour market, not least through organisational models guaranteeing that public and private stakeholders share responsibility for achieving their mutual goals. The Committee is in favour of strengthening work-based learning, such as apprenticeships and vocational traineeships, as they provide the opportunity to develop skills needed in the labour market;

17. considers that there is a real need to develop short training courses in the interests of the flexibility of the higher education system, and with a view to the possible equivalence to higher education of in-house and further training courses provided by vocational organisations and chambers, where appropriate ensuring that successful completion of training of this kind can be recognised, in compliance with the appropriate quality criteria, as at least partially equivalent to one or more courses completed at university level;

18. underlines the need to strengthen higher education vocational training, by promoting vocational courses within technical institutes as well as universities;

19. believes that, in addition to respecting the autonomy of universities, there is also a need to ensure the public availability of face-to-face and online university courses, in accordance with the idea of the 'universitas' as a community;

20. notes with concern that, although significant research, funded under the Horizon 2020 framework programme or from national public funds, is being carried out in European universities, its results are very often not available free of charge, at least not for professionals, non-higher-education teachers or other potentially interested persons, which significantly reduces the impact of the European R & D system, while limiting the access of teachers and persons undergoing training who do not have sufficient resources to access the latest research results;

21. agrees that the pedagogical, psychological and methodological preparation of school and higher-education teachers and trainers is a key condition for successful education in the future and therefore considers it particularly necessary in this rapidly developing area to share best practice, which teachers and trainers could become familiar with and adopt via the mobility available to them under the Erasmus programme, and support joint innovation projects, including initiatives concerning training and study programmes for staff providing initial and continuing training for teachers and trainers; technological refresher courses for teachers and trainers, particularly in some regions, can also help improve teaching standards and so close the persistent performance gap between regions and Member States alike;

22. expresses its concern that Brexit may be detrimental to the rights of graduates, schoolchildren and higher-education students being educated in the United Kingdom; stresses that the risk relates not only to probable changes in education policy in the United Kingdom but also to uncertainty as to the recognition and equivalence of their training, qualifications and degrees in the Member States, a risk which concerns all EU countries and could therefore justify joint action at Union level;

23. calls on the European Commission to ensure, in the context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, that the collateral damage arising from the departure of the United Kingdom, such as any reduction in the excellent ongoing cooperation that currently exists with higher education institutions and R & D centres in the UK, is limited as far as possible provided that the principle of reciprocity is upheld, even if that entails a reasonable burden on the budget;

24. draws attention to the fact that certain less-developed regions may be drawn into a downward demographic and educational spiral to the extent that these two processes are mutually reinforcing, leading to further deterioration in their competitiveness and educational systems; calls therefore for strategic solutions to be drawn up to promote the improved mobility of schoolchildren and students and to assist, where necessary, their return to their region of origin;

25. considers that it is high time for the necessary investment to be made in educational infrastructure, both in more developed and less developed regions, always taking care to adapt coordinated investment to the specific features of the region concerned. In this connection, it is particularly important to allow for greater support from the European Investment Bank and the European funds for regional initiatives aimed at developing education;

26. points out that making higher education, training and publicly funded education systems subordinate to the requirements of effectiveness, direct competitiveness and rapid or even immediate employability could endanger the existence of disciplines and skills whose disappearance would do incalculable medium and long-term damage to European culture, the arts, high-level science and local knowledge, even though they offer very few openings for graduates;

27. stresses that, with regard to school, training and possibly higher education provided in the languages of national or ethnic minorities, everything possible should be done to prevent any restriction on access to education for pupils from minorities and to set up systems that will enable any graduate from a minority background or intra-EU immigrant to enjoy the same opportunities for accessing continuing training and employment as other graduates;

28. acknowledges that, in several Member States, religious educational institutions and schools, as well as higher education and training institutions run by churches and religious organisations make a major contribution to schooling and higher education in Europe, therefore there can be no discrimination against them, like against any education institutions, as long as the national education curriculum is implemented. At the same time, underlines that secular education and the respect for different religions and beliefs are cornerstones of European integration;

29. considers that one of the fundamental challenges in managing the migration crisis and the situation of refugees, asylum-seekers and people in equivalent circumstances lies in identifying the skills, aptitudes and qualifications of the people concerned and, where necessary, establishing equivalences, without which there can be no true educational integration or involvement in the labour market; therefore reiterates its call for support to the Member States in ensuring access to skills identification, language introduction, upskilling efforts and other measures to promote integration at work and in society. It should also be possible for people with training/qualifications acquired in their country of origin to have those skills assessed without delay ⁽¹⁾. Considers that the local and regional authorities concerned should be consulted with a view to joint, effective management of the situation, with due respect for objectives in the areas of integration, equal opportunities and human rights;

30. calls for consideration to be given to ways of boosting sports and health education in the education system, with particular emphasis on primary education and support for extra-curricular programmes. The approach to health education should be holistic, including physical and mental well-being, in order to prevent cases of harassment and violence at school;

⁽¹⁾ CoR opinion on A New Skills Agenda for Europe (COR-2016-04094).

31. stresses that education and training should promote tolerance and the values on which the EU is founded, that is, of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, so as to combat radicalisation, exclusion, xenophobia and the risk of the propagation of extremism in its different forms;

32. expressly requests that, within the framework of concerted efforts to effectively reduce the gap between different regions, due assistance should be provided to certain less-developed regions to empower them to modernise school and higher education, while continuing the development of vocational education and training; it should be noted in this connection that employment opportunities in certain regions are mainly available to applicants who have completed vocational education and training and that, if the development of this type of education were no longer included among the priorities, this would do even more damage to the economic and social situation of the region;

33. shares the Commission's view that, in the area of school and higher education and training, the dissemination of multilevel governance instruments and, where justified, recourse to decentralisation could be a suitable way of encouraging cooperation and partnerships between certain regions — including border regions and those with similar characteristics — with a view to effective planning and implementation of the process of modernising school and higher education;

34. calls on the European Commission to consider the European Committee of the Regions as a partner in the process of drawing up policy for the development and modernisation of school and higher education and, during the consultative process, to make as much use as possible of the expertise of local and regional authorities, on the one hand as stakeholders and on the other as the authorities responsible for supporting or organising the educational system.

Brussels, 30 November 2017.

*The President
of the European Committee of the Regions*
Karl-Heinz LAMBERTZ
