

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies’**

(COM(2018) 268 final)

**on ‘Proposal for a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad’**

(COM(2018) 270 final — 2018/0126 (NLE))

**on ‘Proposal for a Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems’**

(COM(2018) 271 final — 2018/0127 (NLE))

**and on ‘Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages’**

(COM(2018) 272 final — 2018/0128 (NLE))

(2019/C 62/23)

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

Referral	European Commission, 18.6.2018
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	26.9.2018
Adopted at plenary	18.10.2018
Plenary session No	538
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	117/0/2

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

The EESC:

1.1. welcomes the initiative as a next step towards the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) to ensure the right of equal access to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. This is essential **for further and closer cooperation** among the Member States while ensuring their **national competence** in education, training and lifelong learning;

1.2. believes that the new initiative should be part of a long-term vision for the EU's lifelong and lifewide education and training policies in the framework of the EU2020 Strategy and the ET2020 Strategic Framework and preparations for the next EU strategies. This includes the visions and strategies for vocational education and training and adult learning;

1.3. underlines that education should focus first and foremost on **holistic learning, democratic citizenship and common European values**, to ensure peace, security, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, solidarity and mutual respect, open markets, sustainable growth and social inclusion and fairness, while respecting and enriching cultural diversity and fostering a sense of belonging;

1.4. points out that the role of education, training and lifelong learning is to prepare and support young people and adults to be responsible **democratic citizens and be employable** in fair employment, quality and productive jobs, and equipped with adequate skills;

1.5. believes that the European Education Area (EEA) should be inclusive towards all and therefore encourages governments to take steps **to reach real inclusivity in formal and non-formal learning, promote and value informal learning**;

1.6. draws the governments' attention to remaining gaps **in equal access to quality education** for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular minority groups, migrants, children with disabilities and children living in rural areas in different regions of Europe. It is fundamental that the EEA actively supports the **integration of migrants and refugees** in education and the labour market with specific focus on validating and recognising their education, training and work experiences;

1.7. is of the opinion that achieving the objectives of this initiative needs **sustainable national education investment of over 5 % of GDP per country** and the support of available EU funding instruments, including the Erasmus+ programme, and the European Semester process;

1.8. believes that as part of the European Framework for Key Competences, language learning and the validation of non-formally and informally acquired language skills should be supported by **sustainable public finances**. Language learning should **target all, young people and adults, and support those in need**, while being promoted as part of family learning and improved as part of **formal and non-formal learning**;

1.9. supports the proposal's call for **more investment in initial and continuing professional development of language teachers** to overcome the shortage of qualified language teachers;

1.10. welcomes that the proposal aims to further encourage governments to improve access to and **quality of early childhood education**. Further efforts are indeed needed to ensure **work-life balance**, that high-quality, financially accessible Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a right of all children and families, and to consider the **important role of family learning** which helps parents gain confidence in their role and contributes to adult learning;

1.11. supports the proposal that ECEC staff have **a supportive working environment** and that their **professionalisation** is enhanced; urges that the **attractiveness of the teaching profession as well as gender balance and equality in the profession** are ensured;

1.12. acknowledges the importance of **cross-border recognition of learning periods** in all forms of secondary and higher education and upper-secondary qualifications acquired in general and vocational education and training giving access to higher education in the home country. Learning mobility is crucial for active participation in society and in the labour market, and should be enhanced by trust in programmes and qualifications and be based on well-developed quality assurance systems;

1.13. points out that **European tools, instruments and principles** for higher and vocational education should complement and support each other (EQF, ECVET, EQAVET, EQAR, etc.) while the learning outcomes principle needs to be fully implemented in Europe to reach automatic recognition of learning mobility in Europe;

1.14. underlines that the initiative should also focus on **recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning abroad** and acknowledge the role of stakeholders, social partners and civil society in recognising learning outcomes and the role of guidance staff to support the process; encourages the EQF Advisory Group and Cedefop to improve the European Inventory on Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) and the European guidelines for VNFIL as quality standards to governments, social partners and stakeholders to improve validation processes;

1.15. stresses that the achievement of **high-quality** and inclusive education in ECEC, the improvement of language learning, and the mutual recognition of secondary school leaving certificates need to be discussed at all levels among governments, employers and trade unions in **efficient social dialogue**, together with other stakeholders.

## 2. Political context

2.1. The primary responsibility for education and culture policies lies with the Member States. However, over the years the European Union has played an important complementary role as stipulated in Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. It is in the shared interest of all Member States to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for job creation, economic growth and social fairness as well as to experience European identity in all its diversity.

2.2. At the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017, the EPSR was proclaimed which enshrines the right of equal access to education, training and lifelong learning, guided by the Commission's Communication COM(2017) 673. This resulted in the European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017 calling on Member States, the Council and the Commission to bring forward the agenda discussed in Gothenburg.

2.3. The so-called **first package on the European Education Area** proposed Council Recommendation COM(2018) 23 (adopted on 22 May 2018), building on the Education Ministers' 2015 Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. It was announced in the Commission's Communication COM(2016) 379 of 14 June 2016.

2.4. On 22 May, the EC published the second education package including further proposals for the creation of an EEA by 2025.

2.5. This EESC opinion covers **the second education package**, which focuses on further challenges to be tackled to achieve a high-quality and inclusive EEA, such as language learning, automatic mutual recognition of secondary level studies, and quality early childhood education.

## 3. General comments

3.1. The EESC believes that setting up the EEA **for further cooperation** among Member States while ensuring their **national competence** in education, training and lifelong learning, is a key strategy for responding to and advancing social, economic, demographic, environmental and technological development to achieve the competitive integration of Europe as an economic power in the world while ensuring a strong social dimension.

3.2. The initiative is an excellent next step towards the implementation of the EPSR to ensure the **right of equal access to quality and inclusive general and vocational education and guidance throughout people's lives** <sup>(1)</sup>, guided by the Commission's Communication COM(2017) 673 announcing the EEA.

3.3. The EESC stresses that it is our shared objective that education focuses on **holistic education**, training and lifelong learning, with special attention to democratic citizenship and common **European values and European identity**, to ensure peace, security, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, solidarity and mutual respect, sustainable growth and social inclusion and fairness, while respecting and enriching cultural diversity and a sense of belonging to the EU.

3.4. While underlining the crucial role of education, training and lifelong learning in preparing young people and adults to be **democratic citizens and be fairly employed in quality jobs**, the EEA should also be inclusive towards all, with special attention to gender equality, and encourage governments to take steps to reach real **inclusivity** in formal, informal and non-formal learning, while respecting the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

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<sup>(1)</sup> OJ C 173, 31.5.2017, p. 1.

3.5. In this sense, recalling its Opinion <sup>(2)</sup>, the EESC considers that the EEA should also suggest to governments how to provide active support for the **integration of migrants and refugees** to education and the labour market, with specific focus on validating and recognising their education, training and work experiences.

3.6. Education and training systems need time for reforms and adjustments. The EESC would like to see the new initiative as part of a **long-term vision for education, training, and lifelong learning** policies of the EU, named 'European Lifelong Learning Area 2025', in the framework of the EU2020 Strategy and the ET2020 Strategic Framework, and as a preparation for the next EU strategies.

3.7. In order to achieve **high-quality** and inclusive ECEC, the improvement of language learning, and mutual recognition of secondary school leaving certificates, these initiatives need to be discussed at all levels among governments, employers and trade unions in **efficient social dialogue**, together with other stakeholders, most importantly teachers and other educators, parents, guidance staff and learners, but also with community bodies and civil society organisations.

3.8. The EESC acknowledges the '**European Universities**' initiative as a bottom-up process to motivate universities to establish networks to create joint degrees, enhance mobility of learners and facilitate language learning. Whilst recalling its Opinion <sup>(3)</sup>, it encourages **inclusiveness and diversity** in setting up networks of teaching, research staff and students, and to open up the possibility of establishing networks to all universities in the Bologna Process.

3.9. While considering the idea of the '**European Student Card**', the EESC encourages that this initiative builds on the successful student card system and updates already existing students cards. It recalls its Opinion <sup>(4)</sup> when reiterating that the added value of any new card must be clearly identified and complementary with the existing ones.

3.10. Achieving the objectives of the EEA needs **sustainable national education investment of over 5 % of GDP per country** and the support of EU funding instruments under the next MFF, in particular the Erasmus+ programme and the EFSI. The EESC wishes that the future **Erasmus+ programme** and the future **Youth Strategy** include among their priorities holistic and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. The EESC welcomes the role of the European Semester to support structural reforms to improve education policy in line with this initiative.

### 3.11. *Improving teaching and language learning*

3.11.1. The EESC believes that this initiative is essential as language proficiency levels among learners at the end of compulsory education are generally low, and very large differences exist between Member States <sup>(5)</sup>. With increasing intra-European mobility, as well as unprecedented numbers of school children arriving from third countries speaking different languages, we need to reconsider the challenges and opportunities ahead in order to make **multilingualism a true asset of the EU. Languages should receive equal value**, therefore language learning of EU and non-EU languages should be supported.

3.11.2. Schools need support to create a **multilingual learning environment** while striking the right balance between foreign language learning and a high level of literacy and communication development in the **mother tongue(s)**. Content and language integrated learning can promote mobility and integration. The more efficient use of digital and on-line tools for language learning is essential. This requires ensuring their quality and certification as well as access, support and affordability for all, taking into consideration the fact that people may need support to be able to afford, select and use suitable tools to their advantage.

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 264, 20.7.2016, p. 19.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 71, 24.2.2016, p. 11.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C 132, 3.5.2011, p. 55.

<sup>(5)</sup> Eurydice: Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe — 2017 Edition.

3.11.3. The EESC welcomes the emphasis on **language learning** from the perspective of enhancing **mutual understanding, mobility** and, therefore, **European citizenship**. 64 million low-skilled adults need to improve their basic skills, including their language skills<sup>(6)</sup>, to be active European citizens, to retain jobs and to improve their employment perspectives. For individuals, learning languages creates personal and professional opportunities, for society it fosters cultural awareness, mutual understanding and social cohesion, and for companies, workers equipped with language and intercultural competences help them succeed and grow in global markets.

3.11.4. Language learning should **target all and support those in need**, while being improved as part of **formal, non-formal and informal learning**, and be implemented as part of the European Framework for Key Competences and supported by **sustainable public finances**.

3.11.5. The Employment Guidelines 2018<sup>(7)</sup> propose that ‘mobility of learners and workers should be promoted with the aim of enhancing employability skills and exploiting the full potential of the European labour market.’ Lack of language competences can be considered a key barrier to mobility. The EESC underlines that the proposal should target learners far beyond those in compulsory education, and emphasise **language learning for all**, from a young age to beyond retirement, with special attention to **IVET and CVET**, higher education and adult learning.

3.11.6. Language learning policy should aim at teaching **learning by doing**, via student exchanges, voluntary and other activities such as the European Solidarity Corps, supported by the present and future Erasmus+ Programmes.

3.11.7. **The shortage of qualified language teachers** is indeed a serious problem, and the EESC welcomes the proposal’s call for more investment in initial and continuing professional development of language teachers, to meet EU countries’ **professional qualification requirements**.

### 3.12. *High-quality early childhood education and care systems*

3.12.1. The benchmark of the ET2020 Strategy for the participation of 95 % of children between the age of 4 and compulsory schooling in ECEC has almost been met. However, 17 million children out of more than 32 million children below the age of compulsory schooling in the EU still do not have access to early childhood services provision. In addition, there are still gaps **in equal access** for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular minority groups, migrants, children with disabilities and children living in rural areas and different regions of Europe.

3.12.2. The EESC welcomes that the proposal aims to further encourage governments to improve access to and quality of early childhood education. Further efforts are indeed needed to ensure **that high-quality, financially accessible ECEC** is a right of all children and families. High quality services play a decisive role in improving education outcomes, including the development of social competences. The participation in high quality ECEC leads to higher basic skills attainment and is a strong preventive tool against early school leaving.

3.12.3. The EC stresses high consistency with other Union policies. The EESC appreciates particularly the link to the *Proposal for a Directive on Work-Life Balance for parents and carers*<sup>(8)</sup>, acknowledging the need to provide good quality formal care services across Europe. The EESC supported this mutual interaction in many of its opinions to increase women’s participation in the labour market and reduce unjustified pay gaps, as well as to consider the important role of family learning which helps parents be confident in their role and helps contributing to adult learning.

3.12.4. **ECEC staff** should be supported to enhance their professionalisation and to develop a supportive working environment. The initial education and continuing professional development of ECEC teaching staff should be of high quality while meeting educators’ and children’s needs, e.g. how to ensure inclusiveness, teaching democratic values.

<sup>(6)</sup> Cedefop (2017). Investing in skills pays off: the economic and social cost of low-skilled adults in the EU. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 60.

<sup>(7)</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2018-european-semester-employment-guidelines\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2018-european-semester-employment-guidelines_en)

<sup>(8)</sup> COM(2017) 253 final — 2017/085 (COD).

3.12.5. According to OECD (2015)<sup>(9)</sup> the teaching profession faces a major gender imbalance as 7 out of 10 teachers are women. In OECD countries (2015) 97 % of teachers at pre-primary level and 83 % of teachers at primary level are women, while only 43 % of the teachers are women in tertiary education. Gender imbalance among staff and attracting more male teachers to ensure male role models for the children in the ECEC sector are issues that still necessitate urgent action, with gender imbalance connected to the existing status, salary and working conditions of the teachers in this sector.

### 3.13. *Automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad*

3.13.1. The EESC welcomes that the initiative aims to ensure that every student, apprentice or pupil who has completed a learning experience abroad, whether for a qualification or learning mobility, can get that experience automatically recognised for the purposes of further learning. Learning mobility fosters competences and experiences that are crucial for active participation in society and the labour market and should be enhanced by promoting trust in study programmes and qualifications.

3.13.2. In order to avoid repeating full school year/periods, the EESC underlines the importance of cross-border **recognition of learning periods in secondary** and higher education and upper-secondary qualifications giving access to higher education in the home country.

3.13.3. The EESC underlines that the initiative should also focus on **recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning abroad** and acknowledge the role of stakeholders, social partners and civil society in recognising studying and learning outcomes<sup>(10)</sup>. In this regard, it recalls the important role of the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the VNFIL and further improvement of the national validation systems. The EESC encourages the EQF Advisory Group and Cedefop to improve the *European Inventory on VNFIL*<sup>(11)</sup> and to improve the *European guidelines for VNFIL*<sup>(12)</sup> as quality standards for governments, social partners and stakeholders to improve validation processes. Special attention should be given to understand the necessary conditions, synergies and benefits of improving coordination between VNFIL and guidance and counselling services<sup>(13)</sup>.

3.13.4. Permeability and trust between vocational and higher education is still a challenge across but also within countries. **Academic and vocational education** should be given the same value. **European tools and instruments** and principles for higher and vocational education should support each other (EQF, ECVET, EQAVET, EQAR, etc.) while the learning outcomes principle needs to be fully implemented to reach automatic recognition of learning mobility in Europe.

Brussels, 18 October 2018.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
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<sup>(9)</sup> OECD: Education at a Glance, 2017.

<sup>(10)</sup> OJ C 13, 15.1.2016, p. 49.

<sup>(11)</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

<sup>(12)</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/3073>

<sup>(13)</sup> Cedefop (forthcoming), Validation of non-formal and informal learning and career guidance.