

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Education about the European Union’

(Exploratory opinion requested by the Romanian Presidency)

(2019/C 228/09)

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Request by the Romanian Presidency of the Council	Letter, 20.9.2018
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Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	164/2/1

1. Conclusions and recommendations

The EESC:

1.1. believes that the vitality of the EU depends to a great extent on a strong **European identity and on citizens’ identifying with the EU, while preserving national self-identity, and that the success of the European project is based on its values, tolerance and a commitment to diversity of cultures, religions and heritage.** Therefore, it is important to strengthen citizens’ knowledge and understanding of **EU history and culture, fundamental values and rights, core principles and decisions, and the decision-making processes at EU level.** It is also important to advocate global citizenship and the role of the EU as a global actor.

1.2. underlines that **holistic education, training and lifelong learning (LLL) have an essential role** to play in strengthening EU identity, a sense of community and belonging, and responsibility of EU citizens, encouraging their active participation in decision-making about the EU; stresses that they contribute to **peace, security, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, solidarity and mutual respect, sustainable economic growth and social inclusion and fairness,** while respecting and enriching cultural diversity. The goals of EU integration, its advantages and drawbacks must be addressed boldly and confidently at the MS and EU level alike.

1.3. emphasises that learning happens everywhere and constantly, actively and passively. Therefore, **education about the EU is not only a task for formal education and does not only concern young people.** Both ‘life-wide’ and ‘lifelong’ education should be supported and a special focus should be put on older generations, with means of providing information adapted to their ways of learning.

On EU level institutions and policies, the EESC:

1.4. emphasises the need to implement the first principle of the **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** to make quality and inclusive **education, training and LLL a right for all in Europe.**

1.5. suggests putting more emphasis on education about the EU and EU identity in all its diversity as part of **basic skills and key competences, in particular EU-literacy, and thus defining a set of common learning outcomes in this area** (minimum knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the EU). In this respect, better evidence on the state of play in MS is needed — the EESC calls on the EC to update its study on this topic.

1.6. calls for **strategic policy measures at national and EU level** to promote learning about the EU aimed to strengthen a sense of identity and belonging to the EU and to demonstrate the tangible benefits of EU membership for citizens. It is also essential that MS properly implement the *Council Recommendation on promoting common values* ⁽¹⁾ and the 2015 Paris Declaration ⁽²⁾.

1.7. recommends that the future increased **Erasmus+ budget** (2021-2027) should foster a sense of EU belonging by ensuring **learning mobility for all, especially people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds**, and calls for all future projects to put emphasis on learning about the EU, building an EU identity and supporting **intergenerational learning** about the EU, as well as on language learning for all age groups, and civil dialogue for adults.

1.8. **welcomes the 30th year of Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Activities** to promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of EU studies worldwide, and calls for the programme's **budget to be increased** and extended to all education sectors in order to enhance education about the EU and strengthen democratic citizenship.

1.9. calls for better information sharing about the EU with EU citizens, supported by **EU and MS information, communication and education (ICE) strategies**; points out the need for having a **Commissioner responsible for Communication**.

1.10. suggests that **European and national public service media, including the Euronews channel**, should have a **strategic role in informing citizens about EU achievements**. EU Information Offices based in the MS, as well as EP members and other representatives, **EESC members** and other policy makers active in the European field should also play an active role in supporting EU identity-building processes at national level.

1.11. recommends setting up an **EU level policy strategy, while respecting national competence in the area of education, in order to propose recommendations** on cooperation (for instance via the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) or through a high level group) among MS to encourage initiatives in education systems and action at the national and local level on education about the EU as well as EU identity-building, in close cooperation with social partners and all relevant stakeholders. **This should be supported by up-to-date studies mapping the situation concerning teaching about the EU**.

1.12. recommends incorporating education **about the EU** and EU identity-building in the **EU2030 Strategy and the ET2030 Strategic Framework**, and in the **European Semester** process (among the relevant country-specific recommendations), provided that accurate systematic data are available.

1.13. calls for **the provision and promotion of a centralised accessible platform with learning and teaching materials**, linking various current initiatives and portals, available in different EU languages for education institutions and individual learners about the EU, EU identity-building, with a specific focus on the fundamental values of the EU, democracy, participation in democratic decision-making, tolerance, and common understanding.

On the initiatives at MS level, the EESC:

1.14. recommends setting up **national strategies** to include education about EU values, history, achievements and current developments in the **school curricula of all education sectors**, recognising the important role of informal and non-formal learning in this regard.

1.15. suggests that learning about the EU should be done **transversally** in school education as an integral part of all subjects, and that **citizenship education, history, geography and economics** should focus on EU citizenship and its benefits.

1.16. requests that **initial and continuous professional training of all educators** includes education about the EU and calls on the MSs to support teachers' high quality **continuous professional development (CPD) on this topic**. This training should include the competences for democratic culture identified by the CoE ⁽³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Council Recommendation (2018/C 195/01) (OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 1).

⁽²⁾ Paris Declaration, 17.3.2015.

⁽³⁾ CoE (2016) 'Competences for democratic culture'.

1.17. proposes to develop initiatives to encourage and support international **mobility and foreign language learning** for all educators, and to establish a **European Prize/Label** for teaching about the EU and building an EU identity, both for schools and individuals.

1.18. recommends encouraging and effectively supporting **stakeholders**, including trade unions, employers' organisations and businesses, and other civil society organisations working in the education, training, youth and adult sectors, such as scouts and other youth and student organisations, teachers' associations and trade unions, and parents' organisations, to strengthen their activities on learning and teaching about the EU.

1.19. calls on the MS to **encourage partnerships between formal and non-formal education providers** (i.e. schools and youth organisations and/or universities and community based organisations) to provide learning about the EU and citizenship education in general. In this connection, the EESC recommends ensuring **youth bodies** are involved in the process of defining curricula and in determining ways how to deliver citizenship education.

1.20. notes the ambition of the Schuman Declaration, set out by Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950 that 'Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan [but] it will be built through concrete achievements which first create [...] solidarity' ⁽⁴⁾. The EESC suggests that the Europe Day (9 May) or even a separate European Education Day should be celebrated in the MS and serve as a starting point for planning education activities in schools and communities about the EU.

2. Background

2.1. The primary responsibility for education and cultural policies lies with the MS. However, over the years the **EU has played an important complementary role** and it is in the shared interest of all MS to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers of job creation, economic growth and social fairness as well as means of experiencing **European identity in all its diversity**.

2.2. The EESC considers it essential to draw the **European project closer to the people by strengthening their knowledge about the history, achievements and importance of the EU** in the light of Europe's history and its positive impact on people's everyday lives. The EESC emphasises the need for understanding and promoting the **fundamental values of the EU**, as this is a key for mutual understanding, peaceful coexistence, tolerance and solidarity, and also for understanding the **core principles of the EU**.

2.3. 60 years after the Treaty of Rome, EU citizens have still not fully established their EU identity. Currently, 93 % of EU citizens feel attached to their country, of which 57 % are very attached, and 89 % feel attached to their 'city/town/village'. However, **only 56 % say that they feel attached to the EU, and only 14 % feel 'very attached'** ⁽⁵⁾. These figures are important in the light of the upcoming EP elections and discussions on the future of Europe.

2.4. In the last EP elections (2014), turnout was once again at its highest among voters aged 55+ (51 % turnout rate) while only **28 % of the 18-24 age group participated. Participation rate is closely linked to socioeconomic status** ⁽⁶⁾. Lack of critical media literacy and the spread of mis/disinformation also add to distrust of democratic institutions and the EU. Therefore, better knowledge about the EU and democratic citizenship might help in this respect. This is not only a challenge for formal initial education.

2.5. The EESC reminds that studies ⁽⁷⁾ and research ⁽⁸⁾ identify a significant **gap between policy and practice on citizenship education** and that **nearly half of the MS** still have no rules or recommendations concerning **citizenship education in initial teacher education**. While citizenship appears in teachers' CPD, **school heads** do not receive CPD on this issue.

2.6. Another cause for concern is the **disparity in teaching citizenship education in the various education sectors**. For example, there is less citizenship education in school-based **initial vocational education and training VET** compared to general education. For example, there are fewer curricula for teaching about citizenship, less guidance material for teachers and fewer recommendations regarding students' participation in school councils or parent representation in school governing boards.

2.7. Learning about the EU should also focus on teaching about **democracy** (including participation, democratic politics, and democratic society), and **tolerance** (including interpersonal relations, tolerance towards different social and cultural groups, and an inclusive society).

⁽⁴⁾ Schuman declaration.

⁽⁵⁾ EC, Standard Eurobarometer 89, Spring 2018 — Report.

⁽⁶⁾ Based on face-to-face interviews with 27 331 people aged 18 and over in the EU-28.

⁽⁷⁾ Report of the European Parliament on Learning EU at school (2015/2138(INI)).

⁽⁸⁾ Eurydice, Citizenship Education at School in Europe — 2017.

2.8. EU citizenship education in general should be a **dynamic learning process** ⁽⁹⁾, adapted to each context and to each learner, driven by values and equipping learners, mostly young people, with the **knowledge and understanding, skills and attitudes** they need not only to exercise their rights, but also to contribute to their community and society and act with empathy, care and with future generations in mind. The contemporary understanding of civic education has slowly but steadily moved away from the traditional view as only the imparting of 'knowledge and understanding of formal institutions and processes of civic life (such as voting in elections)' to a **broader understanding that includes participation and engagement in both civic and civil society** and the wider range of ways in which citizens interact with and shape their communities (including schools) and societies.

2.9. If **EU citizenship** is to move beyond its current narrow, legal conception and build upon and develop the idea of what it is to be European across Europe, then **our approach to citizenship education requires a clear European dimension**. This can help build a richer, more political conception of EU citizenship, which will be crucial if the EU wishes to increase engagement and 'buy-in' from citizens, and boost support for the EU as a social and political — not just economic — union.

3. General comments

3.1. It is of the utmost importance that people learn and are aware of their role and the possibilities for participating **in democratic decision-making processes at local, national and EU levels**, and that they understand institutional leadership. **Holistic education**, training and LLL, with special attention to **democratic citizenship and common European values and European identity**, would significantly contribute to peace, security, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, solidarity, mutual respect, sustainable growth, social inclusion and fairness, while respecting and enriching cultural diversity and a sense of belonging to the EU.

3.2. The EESC in its opinion ⁽¹⁰⁾ on the **European Education Area** (2018) welcomed that the initiative proposes more inclusiveness in the future education systems and underlines that learning about the EU, democratic values, tolerance and citizenship should be considered a right for all, also as part of the implementation of the **EPSR**. It should be accessible for everyone, with special focus on disadvantaged groups ⁽¹¹⁾ of people, so that all citizens can understand their participatory role in democracy. It is essential that MS implement the *Council Recommendation on promoting common values* ⁽¹²⁾.

3.3. Full implementation of the **renewed Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (2018)** ⁽¹³⁾ is still lacking in the political agenda of many MS and it is essential to improve learning about the EU, its concrete benefits, democratic values, tolerance and active citizenship as part of learning literacy, multilingual competences, personal and social competences, citizenship competences, cultural awareness and personal expression.

3.4. In its **opinion** ⁽¹⁴⁾ **on the future Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027**, the EESC acknowledged that the previous Erasmus+ programme (2014-2021) has greatly supported education and training at European, national, regional and local levels, cultivated a sense of belonging to the EU ('**European identity**' in all its diversity), and fostered **mutual understanding, democratic citizenship and European integration**. The next Erasmus+ programme is essential to strengthen these processes: to support inclusiveness and common European values, foster social integration, enhance intercultural understanding and to prevent radicalisation through the participation of people of all ages in democratic processes, supported by **learning mobility and cooperation** between European citizens, education and training institutions, organisations, stakeholders and MS, all of which are of paramount importance for the EU's future.

3.5. The EESC appreciates the efforts made as part of the **Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Activities** to promote excellence in teaching and research in the field of EU studies worldwide. The EESC regrets that the proposed budget for this programme is still insufficient. While the programme has so far focussed only on universities, the EESC believes that its budget should be increased and the programme broadened to all education sectors and extended to all age groups in order to enhance education about the EU and strengthen democratic citizenship.

3.6. The EESC underlines the importance of implementing the Paris Declaration signed by EU leaders in March 2015 ⁽¹⁵⁾, and reminds that **critical thinking and media literacy, social and civic competences, intercultural understanding and efforts to tackle discrimination** through all forms of learning must become a reality.

⁽⁹⁾ European Youth Forum, Inspiring! Youth organisations contribution to citizenship education 2016.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 136.

⁽¹¹⁾ Definition of 'disadvantaged groups' as provided by EIGE.

⁽¹²⁾ Council Recommendation (2018/C 195/01).

⁽¹³⁾ Council Recommendation (2018/C 189/01) ([OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1](#)).

⁽¹⁴⁾ OJ C 62, 15.2.2019, p. 194.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Paris Declaration, 17.3.2015.

4. Specific comments on formal education

4.1. The EESC reiterates the importance of supporting LLL opportunities for all via their schools and communities to become **democratically engaged citizens**. Inclusive education policies can become a reality if the national and European **media and national policy trends** are supportive and give **good examples of democracy and tolerance**. This should include the right to participate, support for social partnerships and civil society dialogue, freedom of speech, stopping fake news, acting inclusively while respecting cultural diversity both inside and beyond borders, standing for equality for all, and supporting migrants, refugees and minorities to be active citizens of the EU and MS alongside their cultural identity.

4.2. Learning about the EU, democratic values, tolerance and citizenship but also about the role of the EU in the world should be a **transversal topic in schools taught via all subjects and projects, and not only in specific history or citizenship classes**. Learners should be shown examples of active participation in social activities and volunteering by inviting representatives of civil society and unions and from business to present their activities. Students should be encouraged to take part in democratic decision-making processes at local, national, and EU level. **In addition, school heads and teachers should create a collaborative democratic school culture** with the involvement of school boards, taking on board the parents and students when making decisions, and ensuring collegial governance.

4.3. The EESC underlines the importance of having regulations or recommendations on the development of **teachers' citizenship education competences through initial teacher education available in all MS**, including teachers' and **school heads' CPD** ⁽¹⁶⁾.

4.4. The EESC calls for the **provision and promotion of a centralised accessible platform with learning and teaching materials**, linking various current initiatives and portals ⁽¹⁷⁾, in different EU languages for education institutions and individual learners about the EU, EU identity-building, with specific focus on fundamental values of the EU, democracy, participation in democratic decision making, tolerance, and common understanding. **Teaching and training materials** ⁽¹⁸⁾, resulting from various EU funded projects, should be available for all, better promoted and used in schools and in other activities aimed at learning about the EU.

5. Specific comments on non-formal education

5.1. The EESC understands citizenship education as part of a **'lifelong' and 'life-wide'** policy and practical framework. A holistic approach to citizenship education calls for the **involvement of both formal and non-formal education providers**, complementing each other in terms of the content and focus of their education programmes, the pedagogical approach and the types of opportunities to experience participation.

5.2. A wide range of learning programmes provided in non-formal learning settings focus on EU citizenship education. This is the case in youth organisations, for example, where educational work is developed around a participatory process that promotes active citizenship and broadens the horizons of young people. **Youth organisations play a fundamental role as citizenship education providers by facilitating a space for socialisation, interaction, and political and social action** for their members and those they work with.

5.3. Youth organisations organise a wide range of programmes, projects and activities relating to citizenship education, often including a European dimension. These are chosen based on the mandate and target group of the organisation, and include for instance volunteering and international exchanges/events; regular local group meetings/activities; school-based exchange and host-family programmes; simulations of deliberations of EU institutions; mock elections, etc.

5.4. Due to the **complementary nature of formal and non-formal education**, it is crucial to **encourage partnerships between formal and non-formal education providers** in order to give a more practical and hands on experience of how to exercise democracy. Students' and youth organisations should be at the centre of decision-making and should be given the means to directly support feedback and monitoring mechanisms. In this connection, the EESC recommends including young people in bodies in charge of setting curricula and determining ways to deliver citizenship education.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Joint Statement on Citizenship Education & EU Common Values.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Such as eTwinning, Open Education Europe, etc.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Such as: <https://euhrou.cz/>

6. Specific comments on informal learning

6.1. The EESC is aware that much information about the EU can be learned through informal learning — through media, discussions in peer-groups, etc. There should be a coordinated effort and concrete measures leading to full **'EU literacy'** of **all citizens of all ages** to achieve a **minimum level of necessary knowledge about the EU**. This should, besides other aspects, include awareness of the social and economic interdependence of EU Member States and therefore the need for a resilient European society, capable of better joint economic competitiveness.

6.2. The EESC calls for better information sharing about the EU with EU citizens, supported by **EU and MS information, communication and education (ICE) strategies** and reminds of the importance for the EC to promote this agenda, including the possible reestablishment of a Commissioner responsible for Communication.

6.3. **European and pro-European national public service media**, including the Euronews channel, should play a strategic role in delivering correct information about the EU. **EU Information Offices** based in the MS should play an active role in strengthening EU identity, with the support of **EP members and other representatives**, active participation of **EESC members** and other policy makers active in the European field.

6.4. Reflecting the success of the Erasmus+ programme, the EESC calls for a serious communication effort to promote the role of education and information to continue the EU peace-building story, facilitate learning between NGOs both inside and outside the EU, and to create a 'White Dove' branding of EU peace projects to increase visibility at home and abroad.

6.5. Current Erasmus+ students should be encouraged to use their experience from abroad to act as ambassadors of the EU amongst their peers to deliver information to younger people about Europe, about intercultural learning and about how it is to experience a different culture.

6.6. The EESC draws attention to its own projects, such as **Your Europe, Your Say (YEYS)** ⁽¹⁹⁾, the participatory annual youth event of the EESC. Thanks to it, every year, 16-18 year old pupils from all EU Member States and the candidate countries come to Brussels for two days, learn about the EU and work together to draw up ideas and resolutions that are then passed on to the EU institutions.

Brussels, 21 March 2019.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Luca JAHIER

⁽¹⁹⁾ <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/civil-society-citizens-participation/your-europe-your-say>