Education, training and Europe 2020

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report by Mary HONEYBALL (S&D, UK) on Education, Training and Europe 2020 in response to the Commission Communication entitled 'Education and Training in smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe'. The committee notes that despite some improvement in education and training, for the majority of the EU population lifelong learning (LLL) is still not a reality, and **certain indicators are, in fact, worrying**. However, economic growth must be based, as a matter of priority, on education, knowledge, innovation and appropriate social policies to make the EU emerge out of the current crises, and it is important to implement the policies in this sphere withinthe EU 2020 strategy framework properly to get through this crucial period.

Investment in education: Members point out that some Member States have pursued budget cuts in education and training in light of the current economic situation. They believe, however, that those investments with the greatest strategic value should be safeguarded and even increased. They emphasise that the Union's multiannual financial framework anticipates that **education and related sectors will obtain the biggest percentage increase** under the EU's long-term budget, which must be approved. Member States are asked to adopt their national LLL strategies, with suitable amounts of financial resources as the best possible tool available for reaching the objectives outlined in the ET 2020 strategy. The committee also highlights the fact that the economic costs of the consequences of educational underperformance, including school dropout and social inequalities within education and training systems and their impact on the development of the Member States, are **significantly higher than the costs of the financial crisis**, and Member States are already paying the price year after year.

The committee requests that Member States **target a total investment of at least 2% of GDP in higher education**, as recommended by the Commission in the Annual Growth and Employment Survey, being the minimum required for knowledge-based economies. It recalls that, in order to be competitive in the future with the new global powers, Members States are required to achieve the basic Europe 2020 objectives which, in the field of education, can be expressed as reaching 3% in investments for research, increasing to 40 % the number of young people with a university education, and reducing early school leaving to below 10%. The report proposes that Member States deduct investments in education and training from the national deficit calculation of the fiscal compact.

Young people: Members feel that a **special focus should be given to young people**, bearing in mind that the EU unemployment rate has increased to over 20%, with peaks in excess of 50% in some Member States or some regions. They highlight, in particular, the **detrimental effects of austerity programmes on youth unemployment in certain EU States**, especially those in southern Europe, leading to a significant brain drain to other countries, including countries outside the EU; recalls also that one out of seven of today's pupils (14.4%) leaves the education system with no more than a lower secondary education and does not participate in any further education or training.

In this regard, the Commission and Member States are asked to:

- make further efforts to elaborate clearer and more targeted youth policies at EU level which are tailored to meet society's new challenges;
- implement measures targeted at young people likely to leave school early or who are not in education, training or employment, so that they can gain the skills and experience they need to enter employment;
- give special attention to vocational education and training in tertiary education, taking into account the diversity of national education systems;
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- step up their efforts to ensure that young people can gain real work experience and quickly enter the job market;
- monitor how quickly young graduates obtain employment appropriate to their education and knowledge after they complete their education, make an assessment, on the basis of this information, of the quality of education and training systems and of the need and possibility to make adjustments;
- work consistently on the introduction, implementation and further development of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, Europass and the European Qualifications Framework;
- provide support, including financial support, for informal and non-formal education within the framework of the new programmes for education and youth, as well as for citizenship.

The role of universities: Members go on to call on **universities to widen access** to learning, and to modernise their curricula to address the new challenges, in order to upgrade the skills of the European population. They encourage dialogue between private stakeholders, particularly SMEs and local and regional authorities, civil society stakeholders and higher-education institutes/universities in order **to promote the acquisition by students of knowledge and skills to facilitate their entry into the labour market**.

Other priorities: the report moves on to stress (i) the decisive importance of facilitating access for persons with disabilities to LLL, through disability mainstreaming in all programmes intended for the general public; (ii) the need to give workers proper credit for in-service training; (iii) the need to address the disparity between men and women graduating with degrees in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), as exemplified by the fact that only 20 % of engineering graduates are female; (iv) the need to increase investments in sports, and to promote sports activities in schools; (v) opportunities for LLL for older people.

Mobility: with regard to mobility, Members note that, although a European area of education and training is emerging, **the objective of removing obstacles to mobility has not been achieved yet**, and the mobility of learners in VET remains low. They believe that it is vital to promote mobility through ambitious community programmes for education and culture, in particular through exchanges of teachers, students and pupils, and especially in the language field. Members highlight the need for everyone to acquire **excellent language skills** from a very early age, as this will enable people to be more mobile, giving them greater access to the labour market and significantly increased opportunities for study, while serving to promote intercultural exchanges and greater European cohesion.

Early childhood education: the committee stresses the importance of **early childhood education**, and regrets that the Commission does not give adequate coverage to the issue of early school development, particularly its linguistic dimension, despite the fact that it comprises a basic objective of the Europe 2020 strategy. It strongly believes that investing in early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings greater returns than investing in any other stage of education.

Small grants: lastly, the committee encourages Member States to consider **the possibility of introducing a wider system of small grants**, with a minimum of red tape, for pre-university students facing financial difficulties, so as to encourage them to stay in education.