

# Rethinking education

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report by Katarína NEVEALOVÁ (S&D, SK) entitled 'Rethinking Education' in response to the Commission communication on the same subject.

Members recalled that in March 2013, the unemployment rate among young people up to the age of 25 in the EU was 23.5 %, while at the same time more than two million vacancies could not be filled. They affirmed that in several Member States, the number of unemployed and the duration of unemployment is increasing, and matching on the labour market is becoming less efficient.

In this context, Members welcomed the Commission communication, in particular its **strong focus on combating youth unemployment through investing in skills**, calling for the modernisation of higher education systems, as well as promoting world-class vocational education and training (VET). They also welcome actions to address the shortages of well-qualified teachers and trainers.

Faced with the economic and financial crisis, Members considered that Member States should uphold the right of all persons, whatever their economic circumstances, to free and universal education of high quality. They recalled that increased language competences contribute to fostering mobility and improving employability, people's understanding of other cultures and intercultural relations.

They fully supported the Commission's proposal for a new EU benchmark on language competences, according to which **at least 50% of 15 year olds should have knowledge of a first foreign language** and at least 75 % should study a second foreign language by 2020.

Members urged further support of the acquisition and recognition of competences based on non-formal and informal learning.

Recalling the headline targets and goals to which the EU has committed itself under the Europe 2020 Strategy, Members called on the Member States to make public expenditure and investments in **education, training, research and innovation a priority**. They recalled that budget cuts in these fields will have a negative impact on education.

In parallel, Members strongly supported the observation of national situations and the launch of a debate at Union level with relevant stakeholders on investment efficiency and benefits in education and training. They urge the Council to adopt promptly the horizontal anti-discrimination directive which is key to guaranteeing genuine equality and combating bias and discrimination, including at school. They urged Member States to improve open access to all educational and scientific materials, with the aim of lowering costs for education and research, particularly in the light of recent budget cuts in these areas throughout the Union.

**Youth – investment for future:** Members call for the recognition and involvement of youth and civil society organisations in the design and implementation of lifelong-learning strategies. They called for the **recognition of qualifications** gained by young people during their studies at non-home universities, particularly those qualifications gained in the context of the Erasmus programme. They also called for learners and the organisations to which they are attached to be involved in decision-making processes concerning education.

The report urged the Member States to promote the attractiveness and improve the labour market relevance of VET, make it an integral part of the education system and ensure its quality, in particular through the introduction of entrepreneurial and ICT training.

Members invited Member States and local and regional authorities, in cooperation with education institutions, to include **elements of entrepreneurship education in the curriculum content in basic education**, vocational training and higher education.

As regards **scientific training**, Members stressed the need to enhance the attractiveness and value of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects in education. They called on the Member States also to provide more efficient education with a focus on transversal skills, language skills and entrepreneurial skills, in order to achieve a greater level of EU-wide employability. They stressed the need for curricula to be **multidisciplinary** and designed to provide open-ended, transferable skills.

The report highlighted the importance of supporting **young people**, especially those **not in education, employment or training (NEETs)**. It called on Member States to encourage employers to offer more quality apprenticeship placements.

Members drew attention to the added value of experience abroad in helping early school-leavers and young people without educational qualifications to find jobs. They considered that the Erasmus+ programme is an excellent framework through which to enable people in this category, too, to receive part of their vocational training abroad.

Members called on the Member States to:

- implement swiftly the **European Youth Guarantee**;
- invest in early labour-market activation mechanisms and employment schemes;
- halt the decline in spending on support for youth employment and education.

**Financing:** Members called for an integrated approach which harnesses the financing possibilities offered by the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund and national sources of financing for the achievement of smart growth. They stressed the role of the ESF in supporting investment in education and training, skills and lifelong learning; urges, therefore, for the safeguard of the minimum overall share for the ESF as **25% of the budget allocated to cohesion policy**.

**Strong focus on partnerships:** the report highlighted the fact that strong partnerships draw on synergies between financial and human resources and contribute to sharing the cost of lifelong learning. They called for the enhancement of social and civil dialogue on education and training both at national and Union level, and for the strengthening of the role of social partners in policy making. They considered the encouragement of **public-private partnerships** to be an important step towards ensuring shared responsibility for education and career development, with the aim being to help graduates to adapt more swiftly to the requirements of industry and the market.

In parallel, Members noted that the Commission Communication does not specify any concrete implementation measures for cooperation between the educational sector and different social and business partners. They called on the Commission to seek support and initiatives actively, as well as other forms of cooperation with the private sector for the improvement of education. The Member States are called upon to improve cooperation and partnerships between businesses and the education sector at all levels.

On the other hand, Members called on the Commission and Member States to reflect carefully on the concept of cost sharing as a way of funding education. They called for further cooperation between education institutions and providers, the business sector, social partners, civil organisations, and local,

regional and national authorities, as well as employment services in order to exchange best practices, to promote partnerships and to work towards providing quality placements.

**Lifelong learning perspective:** Members encouraged the Member States to promote cooperation and synergies in the field of lifelong learning, in particular to widen access to learning and design, and to adapt and modernise the curricula of education institutions. They noted with concern the wide divergence in available ICT resources and knowledge in schools and higher education institutions between and within the Member States. They stressed that the uptake of **ICT infrastructure and knowledge should be mainstreamed** in all education and training sectors in order to equip students for the digital age as best as possible.

Members urged the Member States to invest in **lifelong learning for teachers**, so as to assist in their professional and personal development, and also to promote the status of teachers' and improve their working conditions. They called for teachers to be valued and given proper recognition in order to improve the quality of teaching provided to pupils.

Members called for the following measures:

- introduce uniform and objective criteria for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of teachers' work and their influence on students' academic results and personal development;
- establish individualised learning pathways in order to help people to update and upgrade their productive, social and economic skills throughout their lives;
- introduce specific measures in the form of financial support to people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in order to ensure for everybody the opportunity of reaching the highest possible level of education and also to ensure that learners' needs and welfare are met;
- ensure that the education system addresses the needs of all prospective students throughout the period of their studies;
- propose tailor-made arrangements to the Roma and other minorities;
- overcome occupational segregation and wage discrimination and discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation in education;
- provide a wide range of support structures, such as scholarships, grants, student loans on favourable terms, tutoring, mentoring and networking assistance to disadvantaged students throughout their studies;
- broadening access to education and traineeships.

Members considered that all Member States should make a major effort to reduce dropout rates, thereby meeting the EU 2020 headline targets which are aimed at a figure **below 10%**.

Members stressed the need to focus on **low-skilled adults** and on the role played by adult education and training in reaching out to these groups, as well as focusing on intergenerational learning.

Underlining the possibilities offered by massive open online courses (MOOCs) in terms of accessibility to high-quality education for everyone, Members called for measures allowing more flexible and creative ways of learning, promoting equality for all learners, and also in terms of **cutting education costs incurred by learners as well as those incurred by universities**.

Members strongly supported the creation of a **European area of skills and qualifications** in order to achieve transparency and recognition of qualifications acquired in VET or higher education and proposed to extend recognition also to qualifications gained outside of the formal education and training system.

Member States are urged to **monitor and evaluate regularly** – with the involvement of relevant stakeholders, whether their education system and programmes have managed to reach out to the members of vulnerable social groups and if they have taken the necessary steps to reform their education systems.

