Academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy

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The Committee on Culture and Education adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Milan ZVER (EPP, SI) on academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy.

Education systems are **facing significant challenges** as a result of the digital transformation, which are impacting teaching and learning processes. By 2025, nearly half of all job openings in the EU (including both new and replacement jobs) will require high-level qualifications.

New, flexible and accessible forms of lifelong learning can successfully address some of those challenges such as social exclusion, early school leaving and skills mismatches.

Continuous and distance learning to accompany societal and economic change: Members are of the opinion that, at every stage of life, everyone must have the right to access learning and training opportunities in order to acquire transversal skills such as **numeracy, digital and media literacy**, critical thinking, social skills and other relevant life skills in order to be better able to adapt to the future. They called for the better inclusion and retention of citizens in the labour market, backed up by improvements in their competences through academic further and distance education and vocational and educational training (VET).

The Commission is invited to **integrate academic further education and distance education** into the European lifelong learning strategy.

The report called on universities to focus on distance education on an increasingly wide scale, and to extend it to cover free short-term professional courses. They promoted the idea of **tailor-made learning** and bridging courses designed for those wishing to enter tertiary-level education who need to gain further qualifications in order to meet entry requirements.

In this context, the Commission and the Member States should strive to **bridge the technological gap** between well-equipped and non-well-equipped educational institutions as part of the national strategies for digital skills.

Technological, financial and regulatory challenges: Members stressed the importance of keeping up with rapid technological developments, in particular with regard to distance education and supporting efforts in this field through significant **investments** in education, with the help of the European Social Fund. They also stressed the need for **adequate funding** for quality education and tailor-made education.

Taking note of the differences in regulatory frameworks, the report suggested **better co-ordination** of existing European transparency instruments such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET).

At European level, the report recommended:

- fostering **cooperation and the exchange of good practices** between education systems;
- encouraging the sharing of best practices by national quality assurance agencies with a view to developing criteria for the recognition of new modes of teaching and learning;

- reinforcing the Commission's support for further university education and distance learning through the Erasmus + programme;
- creating a **user-friendly online digital platform** that would serve as a one-stop shop to facilitate the exchange of best practices between education professionals and students;
- developing a **learning platform** designed for and offered to European educational institutions free of charge, thus boosting the use of e-learning across the EU;
- adapting education and training systems to meet the growing demand for digitally skilled professionals in the EU.

Members welcomed the ambitious plan to provide ultra-fast internet in primary and secondary schools and libraries by 2025/

At Member State level, the report recommended *inter alia*:

- more **flexible educational systems** to enable more effective implementation of open and online teaching methods;
- building on existing validation systems to assess and **certify skills** acquired through up-skilling pathways and to ensure their recognition with a view to qualifications;
- making available opportunities for ICT training and the development of digital skills and media literacy at all levels of education;
- improving the availability of data on the employment and social situation of graduates (‘graduate tracking’).

Lastly, the report called for competences and skills acquired outside the formal education system to be **recognised** through quality assurance and accreditation.