



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

MEMO

Brussels, 6 September 2012

Frequently asked Questions on the European Commission's literacy policy and report by the High-Level Group of Experts on Literacy

Why did the European Commission launch an expert group on literacy, given that education and literacy mostly fall under the competence of Member States?

Member States have a shared interest in improving literacy standards for both children and adults. Improving reading literacy was one of the first objectives of the Commission's 'Education and Training' work programme, launched in 2002, and this objective was re-confirmed as a priority for 2010-2020. Member States have committed to reduce the ratio of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading literacy to 15% at most by the end of the decade.

In November 2010, the Council of Ministers invited the Commission to set up a High Level Group of Experts to examine the most effective and efficient ways of supporting reading literacy throughout life. The group's report seeks to raise awareness of the literacy crisis affecting all Member States and provides recommendations on how to solve it. The Commission will continue to support efforts by Member States to improve literacy. The Commission's role does not in any way infringe the exclusive competence of Member States in organising the structure and content of their education systems.

How were the expert members of the group selected? Why was Princess Laurentien chosen to chair the group?

The members of the High Level Group are experts on literacy. They were selected by the European Commission on the basis of their expertise and status. The Commission also took geographic and gender balance into account.

HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands is a well-known campaigner in this field. She is UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development and chair of the Dutch Reading and Writing foundation (Stichting Lezen & Schrijven).

What is the 'Europe Loves Reading' campaign?

The 'Europe Loves Reading' campaign is an initiative of Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, aimed at raising awareness of Europe's literacy crisis and promoting reading for pleasure. She has attended a series of reading sessions across Europe, involving children, adolescents and adults. These events often have a multilingual dimension, encouraging children to read aloud in different languages, and to highlight the importance of linguistic diversity.

What is meant by the term 'low achievers in reading'?

Low achievers in reading literacy are those who are capable of completing only the least complex reading tasks such as locating a single piece of information, identifying the main theme of a text, or making a simple connection with everyday knowledge.

In order to ensure comparability between EU Member States, the EU benchmark identifies low achievers on the basis of the definitions used by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey in which scores range from level 1 to level 5 (highest level). Low achievers are students scoring below level 2 in the PISA test. These are pupils who are capable of completing only the least complex reading tasks.

The OECD has launched a new Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC). This will provide a detailed profile of skills among adults aged 16-65. It will assess literacy and numeracy skills, as well as people's ability to solve problems in a technology rich environment. It also assess skills used in the workplace. The first results will be published in October 2013.

What impact, if any, has the internet, social media and use of smartphones had on levels of literacy?

The internet and digitisation have changed the nature, frequency and importance of writing. Digital tools provide a strong motivation for writing, one that is particularly evident among young people. Communication via social networking tools such as Facebook, MSN and SMS lies somewhere between speech and writing in terms of the type of language used. Because it is more easily and immediately accessible, texting can be highly motivating, particularly for struggling readers.

These informal practices are starting to be incorporated into the learning processes in some schools and other educational institutions, but generally in the form of individual projects. However, in light of their motivational benefits, these informal practices need to be better recognised by education systems.

Two common concerns surface in the debates around writing with digital media: whether writing by hand is superior to typing when teaching small children reading and writing, and whether texting makes for better or worse writing and spelling. In the little evidence that exists up to now, the arguments seem equally supportive of both standpoints. More evidence on the impact of digital media and handwriting is needed, with a view to determining appropriate approaches in this new context.

Why is there such a gap between the reading performance of girls and boys?

The gender gap is primarily a motivation gap. Data shows that at all ages, men read less for pleasure than women. The analysis of PISA tests showed that teenage boys are less engaged than girls in reading and this is reflected in lower reading performance and higher rates of low achievement among boys.

There are ways to motivate and engage boys in reading: using more digital formats, adapting reading materials in schools to their interests and more generally giving more choice to all students (boys and girls) about what to read. The report also suggests that more men need to be attracted into teaching to act as role-models for boys.

It seems that the High Level Group focused only on reading literacy; is that correct?

The High Level Group focused on reading and writing skills but took different aspects of reading into account, such as new technologies, and the influence of digitisation on reading and writing skills. There is much more research and comparable data in the area of reading than writing. One of the recommendations of the High Level Group is to develop internationally comparable tests on writing abilities and to strengthen research in this area.

The High Level Group used a multi-layered definition of literacy, from baseline literacy to functional and multiple literacy. Baseline literacy means having the knowledge of letters, words and texts needed to read and write at a level that enables self-confidence and motivation for further development; functional literacy is the ability to read and write to develop and function in society, at home, at school and at work; multiple literacy is the ability to use reading and writing skills in order to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate texts received through a variety of media and in many forms (print, digital, audiovisual). Multiple literacy is a basis for digital participation and making informed choices about finances, health etc. International surveys also use this definition.

Are there any other studies besides OECD's PISA study that measure students' reading and writing competences?

There are other studies, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which is coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. It focuses on fourth-grade pupils (9-11 year olds).

For adults, the OECD has launched a new Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC). Its first results will be published in October 2013.

How is the High Level Group going to make a difference?

The report of the High Level Group highlights the main data and evidence on literacy standards, illustrated by examples from different countries and pen portraits. It provides an accessible summary of the most relevant research available and of the main policy, programmes and campaigns across Europe for improving literacy.

The report also contains specific recommendations for different age groups (young children, primary age, adolescents and adults), highlighting what the different actors involved can and should do to make a difference.

The report will be the focus of a debate on reading literacy at the informal meeting of EU Education Ministers in Cyprus on 4-5 October. Their discussions will lead to conclusions to be adopted by the Education Council in November. These will include details of how Europe will take forward the lessons learned.

Is it true that there were approximately 75 million low educated adults in the EU in 2011 and that many of them are likely to have literacy problems too?

We do not have precise figures on adult literacy. Only France, Germany and the United Kingdom have carried out recent surveys. They show that around one in five adults do not have a sufficient level of literacy to cope with the minimal demands of today's society. This equates to nearly 75 million adults across the EU. The new Programme for the

International Assessment of Adult Competences will provide more robust data in October 2013.