

INFORMAL MEETING OF EDUCATION MINISTERS *NICOSIA, 4-5 OCTOBER 2012*

Presidency discussion paper

In order to remain competitive at a global level, the European Union needs citizens with the right skills set to contribute actively to the advancement of its economy and society. Too many Europeans lack the required level of basic skills in reading and writing, acquired too much theoretical and not enough practical knowledge, leave school early or are prevented from getting a higher education degree.

Against this backdrop, the Cyprus Presidency invites Ministers attending the Informal Ministerial Meeting to reflect together on novel ways to overcome the persisting crisis related to literacy deficits and youth unemployment by using to the fullest extent possible the European means at our disposal, namely the general Europe 2020 strategy and the sector-specific “ET 2020” cooperation framework.

Session I - "On making a successful exit from the crisis: The role of education in the implementation of Europe 2020"

Background

The Europe 2020 strategy highlights the prominent role of education and training in delivering a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe, setting ambitious targets for Member States to be accomplished jointly by 2020. This role is especially important in achieving economic growth, improved employment levels and conditions, and social cohesion. However, the debate on the contribution of education to both the growth of the Member States’ economies and to the individual benefits of European citizens is confined only to quantitative aspects of the issue, for example the percentages of literate persons, university graduates and adults participating in lifelong learning. Recent comparative studies (such as PISA) reveal the qualitative differences in learning outcomes between education and training systems and underscore how educational quality is closely related to the distribution of income and to economic growth. In this light, we need to systematically explore the links between qualitative characteristics of education on the one hand and economic growth and individual prosperity on the other.

It is the right time to act at the political level in the European Union, where the political statements on education deliver a clear message. The European Council conclusions of 4 February 2011 urged Member States to “*give priority to sustainable growth-friendly expenditure in areas such as ... education*” when implementing fiscal consolidation measures. The Polish Council Presidency report “Towards a European consensus on growth” also highlights the need to overcome the crisis by implementing strong growth-enhancing measures. During the November 2011 Education Ministers Council, Member States again acknowledged “*the crucial importance of investing in education in order to foster growth and employment in the medium term*”. They also stressed that successful investment in education and training in this context is related to a good quality assurance system and value for money rather than of the actual amount invested. Finally, in February 2012 the Council adopted the 2012 joint report on the implementation of the “Strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training” (“ET 2020”), which stresses the importance of effective investment and reforms in education and training in order to achieve sustainable growth and create more jobs as part of the solution to recovery from the current financial, economic and social crisis in Europe. The joint report underlines the need for a real follow-through by Member States on policy guidance at EU level, in particular the country-specific recommendations (CSRs).

At the same time, the lack of scientific evidence and research on the precise links between the quality of education and economic growth hampers the way towards educational reforms to better target policies. Another major obstacle is the absence of dialogue between economists specialised in education and educationalists. The former often neglect the importance of certain qualitative elements of the educational process and treat the world of education as a black box within their studies. The latter often reflect views of those who are sceptical about the input-output approach and call for a bigger consideration of the educational process itself. Such a dialogue between these schools of thought is absent even between Education and Finance Ministers.

Efficient investment in high-quality education and training systems could lay the foundations for both a quicker exit from the economic crisis and achievement of long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe. What we need to aim at is the kind of growth that is not simply achieved by adjusting education to the needs of the current labour market, but also by preparing today's young people to be motivated and self-sustained learners, able to contribute to the economy and society over a long period, in a way that ensures a high personal return on investment and general economic prosperity and social cohesion in Europe. The mission of modern education and training systems should be to equip citizens with an adequate set of skills and competences and with all the qualities which characterise a democratic citizen of the 21st century.

In the short term, as a priority, education and training systems need to respond and contribute to mitigating the social consequences of the crisis and, in particular, to reducing the current high levels of unemployment, especially among the young. We have to find the right place for theory and practice in education and better relate education and the labour market. Courses should better reflect new realities and include elements of practical training and thus improve employability of students and other learners.

Implementing the 2012 Country-specific Recommendations and the "ET 2020" strategic framework

In the light of the above and as outlined in the Commission's communication "Action for Stability, Growth and Jobs", and in the 2012 CSRs, it is essential for Member States to retain and even reinforce investment in growth-friendly areas such as education and training in a context of tight finances. Qualitative improvements of education and training systems play a decisive role in fostering growth and in the creation of more and better jobs. The 2012 CSRs call on Member States to implement such qualitative improvements.

All Member States are facing the challenge to improve their education and training systems while pursuing fiscal consolidation, by addressing key challenges identified in the results of the European Semester. The existing strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020") offers the basis for sharing and exchanging experiences concerning policy responses to country-specific recommendations, highlighting both the qualitative aspects of reforms and measures and their contribution to the implementation of Europe 2020.

In the field of education and training, the 2012 CSRs focus specifically on: the promotion of access to good-quality pre-school and school education; early school leaving; the situation of young people, youth unemployment and the transition of young people to the labour market; vocational education and training with a focus on work-based training and apprenticeships; the need to modernise higher education with the emphasis on reducing drop-out rates; but also improving the quality and better access for disadvantaged groups, as well as the education situation of disadvantaged groups, including migrants and Roma.

This thematic focus of the 2012 CSRs is in line with the priorities and implementation of "ET 2020". As set out in the 2012 Joint Report, a pilot peer review took place in Brussels on 17 September 2012 that focused on VET and higher education, key areas that emerged from the 2012 CSRs.

As the next step, the follow-up to the European Semester at EU and national level has to be included into the programming of "ET 2020" activities, in particular the work planning and the preparation of operational and time-bound deliverables.

Education in the implementation of Europe 2020 – the role of the Council (EYCS)

As education and training play an important role for Europe 2020 and the policy response to be given by Member States, Europe 2020 would benefit from drawing more on the expertise of Education Ministers; at the same time, it would be in the interest of Ministers to strengthen the role of the EYCS Council. The following issues are submitted to Ministers for their consideration:

- (1) The assessment of the implementation of the 2012 CSRs should be pursued in consultation and cooperation with Education Ministers, who are best placed to ensure the quality and value-for-money of investments in education and training.
- (2) The financial instruments that are and will be available at EU level should be used so that they help education and training to unlock their potential to boost growth and jobs. This does not only apply to the proposed "Erasmus for All" programme, but also to the structural funds. The challenges identified in the CSRs in the field of education and training will be top priorities in the programming of future interventions of these funds. At national level, Education Ministers should play their role in these preparations with a view to concentrating appropriate EU level allocations on education and training.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Against the background of the challenges identified during the 2012 European Semester (access to good-quality pre-school and school education, youth unemployment, early school leaving, work-based learning in vocational education and training, securing efficient investment, the modernisation of higher education and reduction of drop-out rates, support to disadvantaged groups), as well as in the light of the discussions held during the recent Peer Review Seminar, Ministers are invited to consider the following questions:

In this period of continuing economic difficulties and restricted budgets :

- i) Which of the education and training issues currently being given priority at national level should also be urgently addressed within the framework of "ET2020"?*
- ii) How can the role of Education Ministers be strengthened within the Europe 2020 strategy during both the European and national semester?*

Session II - "Literacy for All: A key to more equitable education"

Background

In 2010, the Council Conclusions on basic skills invited the Commission to establish a high level expert group to examine the most effective and efficient ways of supporting reading literacy throughout lifelong learning. This group was established in February 2011 and produced its final report in September 2012, highlighting an alarming situation: while the demand for advanced reading and writing skills is rapidly rising in the context of digitalisation and high-skills economies, literacy levels have stagnated in the European Union during the last decade.

The High Level Group report emphasises that the literacy crisis cannot be tackled by the education system alone. A more ambitious effort towards literacy for all requires partnerships with municipalities, trade unions, businesses, as well as a joined-up approach with other Ministries besides Education, particularly Culture, Health, Employment and Finance, supported by long term political commitment and adequate financing. Increasing societal awareness is a first step for creating a more literate environment, starting within families and from a very early age and continuing with more encouragement for adults to recognise the need to upgrade their skills.

Low levels of literacy are increasingly becoming a barrier to participation in a digital and knowledge society, revolving around the written word. There is a need to set the bar higher, aiming at achieving functional literacy for all. This requires increased quality of education: raising the level of literacy teaching, boosting and better targeting learning support and adopting a more coherent literacy curriculum across ages and school subjects, reducing early school leaving. In the case of adults, this requires better monitoring of literacy levels, strengthening the profession of adult literacy teachers and developing adapted curricula. Across all ages, there is a need to rethink learning materials making them more appealing for the digital age, to update teachers' digital competences and didactical practice, leading to real change in classrooms.

Ensuring that education is an engine for social inclusion and upward mobility, addressing literacy deficits is a priority. In the EU, we have committed to reduce the ratio of 15-year-olds with poor reading skills from 20% at present to below 15% by 2020. Progress to date has been very weak; the next set of PISA results in 2013 will show the evolution of the situation, but we should not assume that it will improve. Achieving this target requires an additional focus on disadvantaged groups, including families with low parental literacy, migrants who face the double challenge of literacy and language learning, or the Roma. Crucially, this involves finding the right ways of motivating these groups to engage more in reading and learning and improving the quality of the support they receive.

The majority of adults with literacy problems have attended at least compulsory schooling, but the system has failed to equip them with adequate reading and writing competences. This subject is still taboo and is thus largely invisible across Europe. To add to the dilemma, in most Member States there are no adult literacy surveys or studies, so decision-makers are unaware of the scale and gravity of the problem, which results in inaction. The publication of the first PIAAC (OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) results in autumn 2013 will provide participating Member States with a reliable measure of adult skills. Ministers of Education should follow up by setting ambitious and measurable targets for adult literacy.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Against this background, and give the experience within Member States, Ministers are invited to consider the following question:

In the light of the High Level Group report, what do you think should be the focus of future action within your country and at European level?
