



Interim Evaluation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)

Final Report to the Directorate-General
for Education and Culture of
the European Commission



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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014

ISBN 978-92-79-35194-5

doi:10.2766/66327

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Executive Summary

This Final Report presents the findings of the interim evaluation of ET 2020 – the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training – which was commissioned by DG EAC and undertaken by Ecorys.

The main aim of the ET 2020 framework, adopted through Council Conclusions of May 2009, is to support Member States in further developing their educational and training systems. ET 2020 is underpinned by the lifelong learning concept and covers learning in all contexts – whether formal, non-formal or informal – and at all levels: from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning. Four strategic objectives guide the work under ET 2020:

- ***Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality***
- ***Improving the Quality and Efficiency of Education and Training***
- ***Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship***
- ***Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.***

European cooperation under ET 2020 is implemented making use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Fully respecting Member States' responsibility for their educational systems and the voluntary nature of European cooperation in education and training, the OMC draws on: (i) the four strategic objectives for European cooperation; (ii) common reference tools and approaches; (iii) peer learning and the exchange of good practice; (iv) periodic monitoring and reporting; (v) evidence and data from all relevant European agencies and networks and international organisations; and (vi) the opportunities available under EU programmes, particularly in the field of lifelong learning.

The bodies involved in ET 2020 are many and varied, encompassing both formal governance structures at political level through to informal bodies with no legal basis and time limited activities. There are: formal governance structures where political decisions are made on the ET 2020 objectives; the important role of the European Commission in working with these political structures and in steering the entire OMC process; and, the informal groups which make up the bulk of the ET 2020 processes.

Since the overarching strategy Europe 2020 was launched in 2010, the relationship between ET 2020 and Europe 2020 has become increasingly important. In the ET 2020 Joint Report of 2012¹, Council and Commission identified a stronger link between the ET 2020 OMC peer-learning activities and Europe 2020. ET 2020 activities have since become partly focused on assisting (clusters of) Member States in dealing with education and training issues identified in the European Semester.

ET 2020 has a number of direct outputs both at EU and Member State level. Types of output at EU level are for example the inclusion of specific calls for action to Member States in Council Conclusions, based on the work done by the Working Groups or research and projects commissioned by actors under ET 2020. This leads to outputs and effects at Member States, notably policy reforms to improve education and training systems. This ultimately leads to longer-term results, through the modernisation of systems, improving employability, and achieving the Europe 2020 headline targets.

¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:070:0009:0018:EN:PDF>

1.1 Aims of the Interim Evaluation

The interim evaluation supports the wider stocktaking exercise of ET 2020 by reviewing and improving its relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency in order to both optimise and prioritise the achievements of concrete and Europe 2020 relevant deliverables for the next work cycle. The interim evaluation also supports the development of governance process, working methods and instruments attached to ET 2020. The evaluation responds to the following key evaluation questions:

Evaluation Question (EQ)	Sub-questions
EQ 1 RELEVANCE AND COHERENCE OF ET 2020 STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND EVOLVING PRIORITY AREAS IN LIGHT OF Europe 2020	To what extent are ET 2020 strategic objectives and priority areas (2009-2011 and 2012-2014) relevant and coherent with the needs of : (a) Europe 2020 (incl. the content of the CSRs); (b) The Youth Employment Package (incl. the Youth Guarantee); and (c) The European sectorial policy agendas for schools, VET, adult learning, higher education, and relevant transversal questions (entrepreneurship, ICT and multilingualism)
EQ 2 OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF ET 2020	To what extent have the objectives of ET 2020 been achieved at (a) European and (b) national level, thus fostering the modernisation of the education and training systems of the Member States? How much do the main achievements (i.e. concrete outputs, initial results, longer-term impacts) correspond to the ET 2020 objectives?
EQ 3 EVALUATION OF THE ET 2020 GOVERNANCE METHODS AND POLICY INSTRUMENTS WITH A VIEW TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF Europe 2020 PRIORITIES – AT BOTH THE EU AND MEMBER STATE LEVEL	To what extent have ET 2020's governance methods and policy instruments been relevant to, effective and efficient in the implementation of the Europe 2020 priorities (including the implementation of the CSRs)? What is the overall added value resulting from ET 2020 policy cooperation and from the instruments/measures?
EQ 4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ET 2020, THE LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMME/ERASMUS+, THE ESIF AND OTHER FUNDING PROGRAMMES	To what extent are the Lifelong Learning Programme and Erasmus+, the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and other EU's funding programmes (such as the 7th Framework Programme/Horizon 2020) relevant and coherent, effective and efficient sources of financing for the Member States that are implementing ET 2020 reforms in line with the Europe 2020 agenda?

1.2 The Evaluation Methodology

The methodology undertaken for the interim evaluation involved desk research, stakeholder consultations and interviews, an online e-survey, and country-level research and consultations. A literature review was undertaken which was linked to the various ET 2020 policies, actors, and processes (particularly the OMC and the groups that participate in it). The interviews were mainly on a face-to-face basis with a wide variety of stakeholders working at the EU level who are directly or indirectly linked to the EU education and training policy agenda. The e-survey was undertaken with various individuals linked to ET 2020 who were sent an online questionnaire linked to the main evaluation questions consisting of mainly closed questions. The stakeholders included those directly involved in ET 2020 including people from DG EAC, attendees of Working Groups, the Education Committee, the HLG on Education and Training and Directors General Grouping. Those indirectly involved in ET 2020 were also key consultees in the evaluation, including DGs that have a link to education and training (e.g. DG EMPL) as well as EU agencies (e.g. CEDEFOP), and 'actors' with a focus on this policy area (e.g. CIDREE, European Trade Union Confederation, European University Association, and European Schoolnet). Country level research studies were undertaken to understand in more detail the views which education and training policy actors in Member States had around the main evaluation questions. In total 151 stakeholders were consulted on a face to face basis and a further 420 people responded to the e-survey.

1.3 Main Findings and Recommendations

Nine conclusions were developed from across the evaluation findings, with 23 recommendations.

Conclusion 1 – Objectives and priority areas: the objectives and priority areas of ET 2020 are broad and many, and provide a framework within which activities take place, rather than being a consistent and strong driving force for change across education and training systems. On the one hand, ET 2020 fulfils an important need in education and training at European level for an integrated strategic framework that covers all the objectives relevant to the field and encompasses diverse Member State needs. On the other hand, the breadth and generality of the objectives and priorities do not clearly meet the requirements of the 2009 Council Conclusions to make European cooperation ‘concrete’ and to produce ‘clear and visible outcomes’. Lessons from early school leaving do, however, demonstrate how ET 2020 can be an effective driving force for change.

The need for close interaction between the different sectors of education and training to deliver lifelong learning, the key underpinning concept of ET 2020, remains as strong as ever. Knowledge of the lifelong learning objective among survey respondents was high, reflecting the importance of this topic in respect of European cooperation. Most survey respondents were in favor of modernising the objectives to achieve a closer connection between education and employment. ET 2020 is the only framework covering all sectors and although it is flexible it fails to specify why tackling issues at European level brings added value. Giving greater priority to lifelong learning and transversal issues would give ET 2020 added value to sectoral agendas. Early school leaving demonstrates how ET 2020 can drive policy change through clarity of focus, strong political imperative, well-organised open method of coordination activities and high quality outputs.

Recommendation (1) in light of the continuing need for lifelong learning, ET 2020 should remain the integrated overall framework steering European cooperation in education and training but with objectives that are streamlined and more tightly focused via sharpened priority areas. In order to generate new objectives, consideration should be given to: (a) urgent social and economic priorities such as already expressed through Europe 2020 and the European Semester; (b) the added value of European cooperation; and, (c) the added value ET 2020 could bring to sectoral agendas by providing a broader context that can help to ensure synergies and coherence between sectors by emphasising lifelong learning and transversal issues.

Conclusion 2 – The operational dimension: mechanisms have not been systematically put in place to enable ET 2020 to deliver the ‘clear and visible outcomes’ specified in the 2009 Council Conclusions. The use of benchmarks and indicators is not systematically applied, and those that have been devised do not effectively serve as a tool to monitor direct progress in the achievement of the strategic objectives. More detailed intended outcomes need to be specified for each objective, which it is feasible to both monitor and measure without an undue reporting burden. The operational nature of ET 2020 thus needs to be enhanced, building on recent developments including the new Working Groups and the Education and Training Monitor.

The benchmarks and indicators that have so far been developed for ET 2020 do not provide systematic coverage of all the objectives and priorities. Most survey respondents stated that the operational nature of ET 2020 should be enhanced, with strong support for the introduction of a concrete work programme. The ongoing development of the Education and Training Monitor shows the potential for gathering both quantitative data and qualitative evidence in relation to the types of measures being put in place in Member States to deliver on the ET 2020 objectives.

Recommendation (2): a more tightly focused set of objectives should be linked to concrete and clear intended outcomes which can be systematically monitored. **Recommendation (3):** a work programme should be added to ET 2020 which sets out a coherent package of activities to be undertaken at European level and with milestones and goals for Member States in order to be able to better measure progress. **Recommendation (4):** to accompany the work programme, and to ensure clarity and visibility of outcomes, a monitoring framework should be implemented, drawing on good practice from elsewhere, e.g. the monitoring of PROGRESS, the EU employment and social solidarity programme (2007-2013) and the framework currently being developed for the successor to PROGRESS. **Recommendation (5):** the new ET 2020 Working Groups should be part of this framework, with reporting linked to their common mandates in terms of deliverables and timelines. **Recommendation (6):** the Education and Training Monitor should continue to be developed as a mechanism to monitor the ways in which Member States are seeking to address the issues they face, further improving the analysis of policy measures.

Conclusion 3 ET 2020, Europe 2020 and the European Semester: the relationship between ET 2020 and Europe 2020 and the European Semester has evolved and become closer over time. Europe 2020 and the European Semester provide important political impetus to what happens within the context of ET 2020, by prioritising the most urgent issues linked to acute economic challenges. For its part, processes within the ET 2020 framework support the delivery of the Europe 2020 headline targets and national reforms to increase the performance of education systems with intelligence and the development of innovative thinking. The introduction of annual peer reviews through DG meetings have been valuable at providing detailed and expert debate on the implementation of education and training issues identified in the CSRs (though with scope to make improvements), and have the potential to strengthen the implementation of the challenges identified in the CSRs. At the same time, there is scope to improve political level interactions between the two domains, and to clarify the linkages between ET 2020, Europe 2020 and the European Semester for ET 2020 participants and Member States.

There is strong political impetus in employment at European level because of the standing of employment policy and the Employment Committee, and governance is more straightforward than in education and training where several sectors operate. Opportunities for political discussion on ET 2020 are limited, e.g. the Education and Training Monitor does not have formal status in Council level decision-making. Although Education Committee members attend Employment Committee discussions of the CSR's, there is scope for still closer co-operation. Linkage to the headline targets of Europe 2020 is one factor accounting for the more rapid and comprehensive progress in some ET 2020 priority areas than others. ET 2020 is increasingly contributing knowledge that is helping Member States to tackle their education and training-related CSR's and most e-survey respondents wanted a closer connection between education and employment. The annual peer reviews, organised through Director-General meetings, have generated valuable inputs into EMCO and Council deliberations on the subject. Feedback indicates opportunities to improve the annual peer reviews.

Recommendation (7): cooperation should continue to be enhanced between the education side of the Council and the Employment Committee so that there can be a more level "playing field" between the employment and education and training domains. **Recommendation (8):** the annual ET 2020 peer reviews organised through Director-General meetings should be established as an intrinsic part of the relationship between ET 2020 and the European Semester. **Recommendation (9):** there is a need for greater clarity regarding the relationship between ET 2020, Europe 2020 and the European Semester for stakeholders. This should be reflected in the current revision of Europe 2020 and also be part of the improved communication and visibility of ET 2020 recommended below in Conclusion 6. **Recommendation (10):** the political impetus behind ET 2020 should be enhanced by integrating the Monitor into a policy Communication from the Commission. This could be the basis for an annual ET 2020 policy debate with the Education Council and the European Parliament.

Conclusion 4 Formal and informal governance: ET 2020 comprises both formal and informal governance elements, both of which are essential to its effectiveness. However, the way in which these elements relate to one another has been loose and not well-understood by some participants or part of the wider community. In the absence of the type of political structures that exist in the employment domain, the High Level Group and Director-General groupings have a pivotal role in completing the circuit between political decision-making related to ET 2020, Europe 2020 and the European Semester and the work of Member States in the Open Method of Coordination that should be enhanced.

There is no formal relationship between the Education Committee, the High Level Group and the Director General groupings, which places the onus on the European Commission to play a strong coordination role. At the same time, the informality of the High Level Group is widely valued by participants. The relationship between the High Level Group and the Director-General groupings is unclear, especially in respect of whether the former has, or is supposed to have, authority over the latter. The sending of substitutes to meetings by Member States is not uncommon and adversely affects the level of debate. Steps are already being made to improve the interface between formal and informal governance and to set up effective feedback loops between the Director-General groupings and Working Groups that could be built upon.

Recommendation (11): in light of the pivotal role that can be played by the High Level Group between the informal and formal governance of ET 2020 and between ET 2020 and the employment policy domain, its role in terms of general oversight of ET 2020 should be strengthened, building on recent enhancements to its role in respect of Working Group oversight and in determining the results to be presented to the Council via the Education Committee. The High Level Group should be responsible for developing and implementing the ET 2020 monitoring framework recommended above, and be given a more general oversight role regarding ET 2020's overall development. This would reduce the onus on the European Commission to have the coordinating function and has the potential to strengthen Member State ownership in ET 2020. For this new role to be effective the HLG membership should comprise Secretary-Generals of Ministries of Education only since they have requisite expertise and authority. **Recommendation (12):** Member States should improve the way in which they interact with both the formal and informal structures at a senior level. Member States also need to ensure that the right people are sent to the right meetings and that minimal use is made of substitutes wherever possible.

Conclusion 5 – ET 2020 and sectoral agendas: While the range and generality of the ET 2020 objectives has enabled it to be relevant and coherent in respect of sector-based communities and agendas, it has not enabled ET 2020 to be implemented in a consistent and coherent manner.

The breadth and flexibility of ET 2020 objectives means that different sectors have been able to use the mechanisms available to suit their own needs. ET 2020 has probably been most useful to sectors which, for reasons of subsidiarity, do not have strong governance at European level, i.e. the school and adult education sectors. However, there are no formal linkages between ET 2020 and sectoral agendas, and mechanisms have not been systematically put in place to enable ET 2020 to deliver "clear and visible outcomes" as specified in the 2009 Council Conclusions.

Recommendation (13): the new objectives which it is recommended should be formulated for ET 2020 need to have greater clarity about the added value of ET 2020 in respect of sectoral agendas by emphasising lifelong learning and the need for cross-sector policy development on important transversal issues such as entrepreneurship and innovation in education (see Conclusion 1). **Recommendation (14):** in order to strengthen the linkages between sectoral agendas and ET 2020, the Directors General groupings should be given a clearer- oversight role in respect of regular joint planning and reporting on sectoral progress against the new streamlined ET 2020 objectives recommended above (Conclusion 1).

Conclusion 6 Transparency and visibility: ET 2020 processes are complicated, involving different bodies with different formal/informal statuses. It is difficult for those not involved in running the system to understand it in its entirety, and hence to understand their role. This lack of transparency deters participation and undermines the effectiveness of processes and outputs. ET 2020 also lacks adequate levels of visibility in the context of the 2011 Council Conclusions which invited the Commission to ‘strengthen the visibility and transparency of measures taken in the context of the OMC by ensuring effective operational coordination’: outside of those directly involved, awareness tails off dramatically.

While most e-survey respondents had a good awareness of ET 2020 there is scope to improve it. Many interviewees commented on the complexity of ET 2020 processes and the difficulty involved in understanding their contribution. Member States stated it could be difficult for them to know what work was being done in which group within ET 2020, making it difficult for them to coordinate contributions. Even within the European Commission, knowledge of ET 2020 was limited outside DG EAC. No overall description exists of how the different components of ET 2020 fit together.

Recommendation (15): a ‘Participant Guide to ET 2020’ should be produced and made available which describes the different elements of ET 2020 processes, the roles and responsibilities of different bodies and their inter-relationships. It should also elucidate the relationship between ET 2020, Europe 2020 and the European Semester (see Conclusion 3). **Recommendation (16):** the visibility of ET 2020 should be improved through the introduction of a communication action plan to ensure that outputs, such as reports, tools, and peer review reports, are easily accessible to the wider public both through the Europa (DG EAC) website (see next point) and through the use of effective and innovative dissemination methods such as the use of social media, with a timetable of actions based on key events, e.g. related to CSRs, Presidency events etc. Working Groups should seek to engage wider stakeholders through the use of web-based communication platforms. **Recommendation (17):** Member States should improve their capacity to interact effectively with ET 2020 by implementing the proposals put forward to the High Level Group in the spring of 2014 to coordinate the work of their national representatives in the various bodies of ET 2020. The above guide should detail (through good practice examples) how Member States can maximise their internal coordination and ensure that ET 2020 outputs flow effectively around their national stakeholders (see also Conclusion 8).

Conclusion 7 Modernisation and excellence: While ET 2020 embraces the needs of all Member States, there is naturally a tendency for the focus to be strongest on issues and Member States where there is the greatest need for modernisation. ET 2020 should more clearly express the diversity that exists and ensure that ET 2020 has a focus on excellence as well as modernisation, on exceeding targets and not just achieving them.

Member States with the greatest reform needs are more likely to demonstrate the greatest benefits from ET 2020 participation. Often such countries are deficient in terms of national research capacity and therefore particularly value outputs from ET 2020. Although countries with advanced systems report positive benefits, they are, at the same time, often in a position of being “donors” rather than “receivers” of new ways of thinking.

Recommendation (18): ET 2020 processes should ensure that they focus on excellence as much as on enabling the modernisation of education and training systems. The clustering of countries, as happens through peer learning activities and CSR's, should be developed further to enable all countries to benefit from ET 2020 and so that countries with well-developed systems can continue to learn from one another. **Recommendation 19:** A central database of national good practices should be created to stimulate a focus on excellence. The database under the Mutual Learning Programme of DG Employment could be used as a model.

Conclusion 8 – Effectiveness and added value: The effectiveness of ET 2020 in delivering change in Member States depends on a balance of factors, those intrinsic to ET 2020 and those internal to Member States. However, a lack of impact in Member States is likely to be due less to the effectiveness of ET 2020 processes and outputs and more to weaknesses in the take-up of ideas within Member States themselves.

ET 2020 processes and outputs tend to be rated highly by participants. In contrast, the ability of outputs to influence people and feed into policy reduces quickly beyond the individuals themselves who take part in ET 2020. While three quarters of e-survey respondents use materials themselves “very much”, only two fifths of policymakers do so. One in 10 survey respondents stated that they never disseminate ET 2020 outputs “back home”. Barriers to implementation were experienced by around two thirds of Working Group respondents. Some countries are much more highly organised to discuss and disseminate outputs than others, from which others could learn.

Recommendation (20): Peer learning activities should be organised on this topic to enable countries to benefit from the experiences of others. This should take into account differences between countries in terms of their internal government structures, especially between regionalised and centralised countries. **Recommendation (21):** The European Commission should devise and implement support measures beyond the current OMC processes which Member States can draw upon to help them put into action lessons emerging from ET 2020 activities. Measures could include development of networking and opportunities to experiment or pilot new and innovative approaches, country-specific action plans, and capacity-building support. Resources in current funding programmes should be made available for these purposes.

Conclusion 9 Peer learning activities: Participants' opinions on ET 2020 processes and outputs are generally very positive, with a clear set of critical success factors identifiable. Peer learning activities are especially valued and this is because they meet a broad set of needs. However, a systematic approach to peer learning has not yet been put in place.

Critical success factors identified for ET 2020 processes include their openness and informality, their focus on actions rather than words and on ensuring they are not an end in themselves, and the balance between strategic actors and practitioners. The critical success factors for outputs such as reports include focusing on practical action, ensuring that learning draws on Member States' experiences and ensuring deliverables do not sit on shelves. An important obstacle to effectiveness in ET 2020 can be a lack of energy, motivation and drive. Peer learning activities are especially valued by participants for generating practical outcomes of direct use. The Director-General annual peer reviews are valued for bringing together people with relevant expertise in an open and productive format.

Recommendation (22): a more systematic approach should be adopted to peer learning using good practice examples from elsewhere, such as the DG Employment Mutual Learning Programme. **Recommendation (23):** a wide range of peer learning activities should be used. Some parts of ET 2020 now have extensive experience in using peer learning activities, such as the Working Group dealing with higher education, and this could be a valuable source of expertise upon which other WGs could draw.

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