

## RESPONSE TO THE COMMISSION'S CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE "EU 2020" STRATEGY

The European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) represents employers in the field of education, covering vocational and higher education as well as school and pre-school education. We are newly established and have recently applied with our trade union partners, ETUCE, for recognition by the Commission as the European social partners for education.

Education is one of the largest employment sectors in the labour market. Its strategic importance is, in the context of the Lisbon strategy and now EU 2020, unparalleled. Europe's aspirations for global leadership in the knowledge economy rest ultimately on the quality of our education. We need every citizen to have sound basic skills. VET systems must be tuned to the rapidly changing needs of the labour market. Higher education and research institutions, in partnership with business where appropriate, should provide Europe with the decisive intellectual edge on which sustainable high quality jobs and the economic platform to pay for advanced social provision and environmental protection ultimately depend.

## General remarks on the consultation paper

We agree entirely with the overall vision of a smarter, greener social economy, underpinned by the key input of knowledge. We would add though that alongside knowledge, Europe needs the right skills and attitudes as well. The key skills are "transversal" ones which apply to most types of activity and facilitate mobility, such as IT skills and mathematical and linguistic proficiency. The key attitudes required include the ability to work with others, willingness to take personal responsibility, understanding and acceptance of diversity and mutual interdependence and an enthusiasm for new learning.

Such skills and attitudes are as important as knowledge, both in the development of the economy and socially. Indeed social and economic factors are of twin importance: education must equip pupils with the means to live a full and rounded life, not just as economic factors of production.

We are naturally pleased to see the consultation paper's emphasis on education and training. At the same time we recognise that since education is a national competence, the EU's powers in this field rest on the voluntary co-ordination of national policy and on European initiatives and programmes such as Erasmus and Leonardo. Moreover the European education and training benchmarks are particularly powerful instruments in this respect.

Consequently, we welcome the statement in the consultation paper that: "EU 2020 should focus on key policy areas where collaboration between EU and Member States can deliver the best results, and on improved delivery through better use of the instruments at hand." That appears to us to recognise that the objectives of 2020 will be better achieved through co-operation in European, national and sub-national policy making rather than through EU regulation.

In the past this co-operation was often limited to the Commission and the member states. We would like to emphasise that other interested parties, including the social partners, also need to be fully involved at European level. The same point applies at national level and the Commission needs constantly to remind the member states of the advantages to their domestic reform programmes of buy-in from national social partners.

Education is resource-intensive. There is a clear correlation between investment and quality, most obviously seen in the ratio between teachers and learners, at all levels of education. The consultation paper makes the point that "as public sector deficits are brought back under control, public expenditure needs to be reshaped in such ways that enable us to reach the 2020 vision. Cutting spending in more forward-looking areas such as education and research would make this more difficult to achieve." The reality is that in most countries education will have to take a share of the pain of fiscal consolidation (indeed this is already happening in some member states), but the point is well made that because of the strategic importance of education expenditure reductions should wherever possible avoid damaging Europe's future economic and social prospects. This applies not just to the nurturing of knowledge-focussed businesses but also to the education institutions which feed those businesses in the first place. As the consultation paper says later: "new political priorities need to be reflected in budgetary policies." If taken at face value, that would lead to a very substantial shift in the Commission's internal budget allocations, one of the main areas to benefit being education and training.

Some more specific remarks

We agree with the points made at the top of page 5 about the need to improve performance in relation to basic skills, particularly to reduce the numbers of early school leavers and of low achievers in reading, mathematics and science. Indeed the recent evidence of a worsening of performance in reading at the age of 15 is deeply worrying. It may be true that a similar trend is observable in the US and Japan, but that does not make it any less unacceptable. If it is not already happening, this could be a fruitful area for a European research programme, to investigate the reasons and to identify the techniques used by the more successful countries.

The proposed European Research Area is welcome if it co-ordinates national research programmes to reduce the amount of overlap and to ensure that gaps are filled. But it should not try to eliminate competition in research between member states, as competition drives innovation.

Indeed the remarks in the paper about creativity and innovation need to be extended to all levels of education, both public and private. The achievements of higher education depend to a considerable extent on the quality of education provided in schools. Similarly, the paper's comments on the need for "attractive career prospects for researchers" are equally valid for teachers at all levels. The quality of education depends of course on the quality of teachers.

The paragraph on page 6 about the so-called fifth freedom, the freedom of knowledge and technology to circulate, needs considerable expansion for it to be properly understood.

"Making it happen": We agree with the remarks at page 9 concerning the need to involve social partners in the formulation and co-ordination of policy and our Federation would welcome specific incentives for social partners in order to strengthen partnerships in the education and training area (page 9). We note with interest the consideration currently being given by the Commission to the possibility of establishing European sectoral employment and skills councils, in which of course education interests would need to play a prominent part.

We would like to see more commitment to the need for close links between secondary education and enterprises (both public and private), to complement the emphasis in the paper on links between business and research. Even during the downturn and the accompanying increase in unemployment, there have been continuing skills shortages in certain sectors and areas, which in principle could be mitigated by closer links between secondary education providers and the enterprises concerned.

### Conclusion

The vision set out in the consultation paper is clear and compelling. We support that vision and wish to contribute, in our members' schools, colleges and universities and at national and EU level, to making it a reality.

The distinction between a vision and the means of achieving it is of course critical. To reach the situation where Europe's social and economic performance is truly based on knowledge, skills and attitudes requires not only large public investment and political determination, but also the genuine commitment of all stakeholders: employers, trade unions, teachers, learners, parents and community institutions such as churches. It is easy to aspire to the

vision of a knowledge-based Europe and much more difficult to achieve it. We look forward to genuine commitment from the Commission in driving energetically towards the vision in partnership with member states and stakeholders such as the social partners.

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