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EUNEC answer to the consultation 'Schools for the 21st century'

On 19 January 2007 EUNEC, the European Network of Education Councils, was invited by the European Commission on the first meeting of the Platform of European Stakeholders organisations. The European Commission clarified the launch of a public consultation on school education and asked EUNEC to be an active partner in this consultation process.

Therefore, EUNEC organised a seminar for its members in Tallinn (10-11 June 2007) on the subject: "Schools of the future? What kind of schools do we want in Europe tomorrow? During this very inspiring seminar, EUNEC members and European experts¹ reflected on this theme in order to prepare the debate in the national Councils. The report of this seminar can be downloaded from the EUNEC website.²

As conclusion of this seminar, EUNEC presented a communication as a proposal for a common answer to the consultation of the European Commission and as an input for the debate within the national or regional member councils of our network. As the official consultation document was not available at the moment of the seminar, this proposal did not follow the format of this document (eight questions).

The Executive Committee of EUNEC decided on its meeting of 7 October 2007 in Lisbon to adopt the text below as a common EUNEC answer to the consultation. Because of the principle of subsidiarity, the concrete answers to the eight questions are left to the regional or national member councils of EUNEC.

1 The idea of a programme for school education

It is useful to rethink the 'school concept' in the context of a learning society; the central issue in this exercise should be quality, accessibility and efficiency.

EUNEC supports the idea of a coherent education policy supported by the European Union. At the moment higher education, lifelong learning and vocational education and training (VET) are involved in an ambitious modernisation process. Within the education and training 2010 there were some stimuli for modernisation of school education but they lack some comprehensiveness. As school education offers the basis for all other

¹ Professor Peter Mortimore and Mr. Tapio Saavala (European Commission)

² www.eunec.eu

learning paths in higher education, in VET and in LLL, it should be considered as a core element of any education policy.

EUNEC welcomes the aspirations of the Commission:

- School systems should enable all students to gain key competences.
- Schools and teaching should meet each child's specific needs.
- Negative impact of socio-economic factors should be minimised.
- All staff should have necessary knowledge, skills and competences.
- All schools should be well-led, adaptable learning communities.

EUNEC agrees:

- with the shift from school education to lifelong learning
- with the use of 'evidence' and 'benchmarks'
- on the need to work with teachers
- on the value of the eight key competences
- on the need for change and modernisation.

EUNEC asks more attention for:

- societal influence (including historical and cultural influences on school systems)
- specific local situations;
- citizenship competences;
- pupil behaviour and social and emotional competences ;
- health education and sports;
- arts and culture;
- the discussion on pre-school education;
- the involvement of all stakeholders (no top down approach – pupils, parents, teachers, providers, social partners, local authorities...)

2 What can the EU do to help Member States to modernise their education system?

Quality, efficiency and equity of education systems are concepts which are understood and developed in different ways in the Member States of the Union, depending on the missions they established for their schools. In this context, it is important that we don't speak about modernisation of schools but about modernisations that each Member State (or region) wants and about modernisations that are already in preparation. What can be the role of Europe in this context of large diversity of needs and means?

The European Union should fully respect the principle of subsidiarity in the field of education and training. EUNEC does not want European regulations in education and training.

The economical, social and cultural dimension of a school organisation led to the establishment of an original concept of education and lifelong learning in each country. This reduces the validity and the importance of comparisons, especially when they are quantitative. However, it is important to enhance transparency of school organisations and the mutual knowledge of the diverse systems in a way that one can share practices that have led to good results in a specific context.

EUNEC expects that the EU inspires, facilitates and supports the modernisation of the diverse education and training systems in the different Member States by developing

common guiding principles, relevant as guiding principles for policy makers and institutions, and common tools and instruments, directly relevant for policy makers, institutions and individual citizens.

Guiding principles are relevant, particularly on:

- transparency of qualifications (EQF);
- key competences (linked to other instruments such as EQF, ECVET, Europass, language portfolio...);
- a focussed and problem centred program for teacher professionalisation;
- quality improvement, linked to equity and efficiency;
- counselling and guidance;
- formal and non-formal learning, including very young children;
- students' and pupils' own activity in facilitating their learning and the learning of others

Instruments:

- Comparative evidence (both quantitative as qualitative) to take informed policy decisions. In the interpretation of this evidence, we have to be aware of the very different contexts in the Member States and we cannot content ourselves by comparing figures;
- Peer Learning Activities extended to practitioners and not only for policy makers;
- Support for European exchange of ideas and good practices (New Lifelong Learning Programme, networks of stakeholders...);
- Readability and transparency are fundamental. The actors in the field are not always conscious of the specific features of their system according to other systems in Europe. This can be the reasons of failures of reforms inspired by systems abroad. Europe could propose new possibilities to read the different systems.
- Instruments to manage and stimulate more adaptive learning pathways for citizens (comprehensible information and adapted guidance);
- Comprehensible systems of credit transfer and accumulation

Changing schools is a difficult and long-term project. Member States and the European Union should also pay a lot of attention to implementation strategies within the systems, teacher practices, and the public opinion. If we want a transfer of good practices, we have to adapt them at the context of the new system and provide an effective implementation strategy.