



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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*Mr Stanislaw TILLICH
President of the Bundesrat
Leipziger Straße 3-4
D – 10117 BERLIN*

Dear President,

The Commission would like to thank the Bundesrat for its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020): New priorities for European cooperation in education and training {COM(2015) 408 final}.

The Commission's Draft 2015 Joint Report responds to a requirement contained in the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020').¹ They foresee in a Joint Council-Commission Report at the end of each ET 2020 work cycle to evaluate overall progress and to serve as the basis for establishing a fresh set of priority areas for the following work cycle.

The Draft 2015 Joint Report is the outcome of a broad mid-term stocktaking of the ET 2020 strategic framework, involving extensive consultations with the Member States, education and training stakeholders, relevant civil society organisations and the European social partners as well as an independent interim evaluation of ET 2020. In February 2014, the Council invited the Commission to use the mid-term stocktaking "to help prepare the next Draft Joint Report, with a more forward-looking focus which identifies key priority areas and concrete issues for future work".² The Commission's Draft was prepared in this perspective.

The timely engagement of the Bundesrat has made it possible for the Commission to take due note of its Opinion before the formal adoption of the final version of the 2015 Joint Report at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council of 23 November 2015. The Commission is pleased that this final version of the Joint Report gathered a full consensus between the Governments of the Member States at the Council.

On the substance of the Bundesrat's Opinion, the Commission is satisfied that the Bundesrat

¹ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), OJ C 119, 8.5.2009, p. 2.

² Council conclusions of 24 February 2014 on efficient and innovative education and training to invest in skills - Supporting the 2014 European Semester, OJ C 62, 4.3.2014, p. 4.

shares the view that European cooperation in education and training is of great relevance, especially in view of the current challenges the EU is facing. Because of the primordial political importance attached by the Commission to social inclusion and the effective prevention of violent radicalisation, the Commission welcomes in particular the Bundesrat's support for education's role as a prerequisite for successful integration, as an essential building block for a democratic society, and as an important contributor in preventing marginalisation and radicalisation.

At the same time, the Commission agrees with the Bundesrat that education and training cannot, on their own, be saddled with the burden of tackling these issues and that fostering social inclusion and preventing violent radicalisation are a concern for the whole of society, to which education and training can make their own specific and fundamental contribution. This is precisely the approach taken in the Commission's European Agenda on Security.

The Commission has taken good note of the concerns expressed by the Bundesrat regarding the importance of preserving the competences of the Member States (and their regional authorities) in the area of education and training. The Commission would like to emphasise that the priority areas and concrete issues for future work identified in the 2015 Joint Report are merely topics for European cooperation through joint analysis, mutual learning and dissemination of good practices. The Joint Report does not set priorities for national education and training policies.

In this context, it is pertinent to signal one of the outcomes of the mid-term stocktaking, which was precisely that ET 2020 is appreciated as a necessary forum for cooperation (in light of the common challenges faced by the education and training systems) while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and training and for the organisation of their education and training systems. Furthermore, ET 2020 cooperation is entirely voluntary. As explicitly stated in the Joint Report, "Member States will select, in accordance with national priorities, those areas and issues for work and cooperation in which they wish to participate". The Commission trusts that this clarification will allay many of the concerns expressed in the Opinion of the Bundesrat.

In response to the more technical comments in the Opinion, the Commission would like to refer to the attached annex.

The Commission hopes that the clarifications provided in this reply address the issues raised by the Bundesrat and looks forward to continuing the political dialogue in the future.

Yours faithfully,

*Frans Timmermans
First Vice-President*

*Tibor Navracsics
Member of the Commission*

ANNEX

The Commission has carefully considered the issues raised by the Bundesrat in its Opinion and would like to offer the following observations.

Point 4: *Regarding Member State reporting under ET 2020, the Commission wants to emphasise that its purpose is to promote the rationalisation and streamlining of reporting obligations. There is no need for the Member States to duplicate factual reporting done by Eurydice and Cedefop through ET 2020 National Reports.*

By focusing on remaining challenges and suggestions for future ET 2020 work – as was done in preparation for the 2015 Joint Report – National Reports offer a clear added value in laying the groundwork for the Joint Report, as this is destined to identify the priority areas for the future. The Commission reminds that the work cycle has been extended to 5 years.

Point 5: *On the broad aims of European education and training cooperation and their relation to the European Union’s overall priorities, the 2015 Joint Report must be read in conjunction with the ET 2020 Council conclusions of 2009 and its strategic objectives, which the 2015 Joint Report explicitly confirms.*

As stated in the ET 2020 Council conclusions of 2009, the primary goal of European cooperation is “to support the further development of education and training systems in the Member States which are aimed at ensuring: (a) the personal, social and professional fulfillment of all citizens, and (b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue”.

To give a full effect to this statement of purpose, and against the background of the challenges facing Europe today, the 2015 Joint Report recalls that education and training make a substantial contribution to several broader EU strategies and initiatives, including the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Youth Guarantee, the Youth Employment initiative, the Digital Single Market initiative, the European Agendas on Security and Migration and the Investment Plan for Europe.

The Commission is convinced that the positive contribution made by education and training to these broader EU strategies and initiatives does not diminish, but reinforces, their intrinsic role and fundamental value in personal development and fulfillment.

Points 6-7-8: *On the role of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the instruments for transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications, the Commission would like to draw attention to the adjusted formulation of the 2015 Joint Report, compared to the Draft Report, notably taking into consideration the Opinion of the Bundesrat.*

The 2015 Joint Report mentions that further work should promote the validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as facilitate the transparency and the comparability of qualifications across Europe. With regard to newly arrived migrants, it is pointed out that

existing transparency instruments could also help a better understanding of foreign qualifications in the EU, and vice versa. Furthermore, adequate recognition and validation can support the uptake of open and innovative learning practices, including those using digital technology.

Further work should also focus on implementing the EQF and the National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) more effectively and on further developing the EQF in order to enhance the transparency and comparability of qualifications. Use of the EQF and NQFs can support existing recognition practices and thus make the process of recognition easier.

Particular attention should also be given, after a preliminary assessment, to simplifying and rationalising existing EU instruments such as tools, portals and other services on skills and qualifications aimed at the wider public with a view to strengthening outreach.

Point 12: *On the possible development of future competence frameworks, the Commission would like to take this opportunity to underline that such frameworks are developed with the aim to support the Member States deal with important common challenges in education and training and only when the added value of such frameworks has been assessed.*

ET 2020 competence frameworks are developed through mutual learning processes and joint analysis. They are voluntary instruments, are not legally binding and do not aim to harmonise the law or regulations of the Member States.

Point 13: *The Commission concurs with the Opinion of the Bundesrat that digital media are effective in teaching under specific circumstances only and that the use of digital media in education and training should not be an end in itself.*

To underscore this point, the 2015 Joint Report mentions that the introduction of innovative methods (including new digital tools) should concern well-tested practices and didactic materials that have demonstrated their capacity to contribute in a concrete manner to inclusive, engaged learning for diverse learners. At the same time, societies are becoming increasingly digital, thus boosting demand for digital competences, and education and training must address this need.

Point 14: *On the use of the terms “peer review” and “peer counseling” in the context of ET 2020 mutual learning practices, The Commission would like to clarify that:*

- *“Peer review” is an established term in ET 2020 practice, introduced by the 2012 Joint Report. To avoid misunderstandings, the final version of the 2015 Joint Report explicitly clarifies that the use of the term “peer review” explicitly refers to a voluntary practice agreed in the 2012 Joint Report.*
- *“Peer counselling” is a new concept. To ensure that it is well-understood, a footnote was added to the final version of the 2015 Joint Report, explaining that peer counselling is an instrument which brings together, on a voluntary and transparent*

basis, professional peers from a small number of national administrations to provide external advice to a country in the process of a significant policy development. It is intended to go beyond information-sharing and provide a forum for finding solutions to national challenges in a participatory workshop.

Points 15-16: *The Commission will refrain from commenting on the parts of the Opinion of the Bundesrat that specifically concern the Staff Working Document. The SWD is a supporting document drafted by the Commission Services. It has not been adopted by the Commission and does not form part of the 2015 Joint Report adopted on 23 November 2015.*