

PORTUGUESE ASSEMBLY
EUROPEAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Opinion

COM(2016) 941

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,
THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

IMPROVING AND MODERNISING EDUCATION

PART I – INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Pursuant to Article 7 of Law 43/2006 of 25 August 2006 on the monitoring, examination and issuing of opinions by the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic in the context of the process of EU integration, as amended by Law 21/2012 of 17 May 2012, and in accordance with the Guidelines for the Scrutiny of EU Initiatives approved on 1 March 2016, the European Affairs Committee received a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on ‘Improving and Modernising Education’ (COM(2016) 941).

PART II – BACKGROUND

1. This initiative relates to a Commission Communication on improving and modernising education in the European Union (EU). In this document, the European Commission clearly acknowledges the political importance and strategic priority given to this matter for the EU as a whole.
2. This document is divided into three chapters which correspond to the Commission’s research into the strategic importance of education for social development and cohesion. In this respect, it puts forward a set of proposals — targeted either at specific education sectors, from early childhood education to higher education, or across the board — with the aim of supporting Member States’ efforts ‘to make high-quality education a reality for all.’
3. It is considered that Europe can only achieve consistent growth through greater productivity based on a highly qualified workforce, an objective that necessarily requires education and training systems which are tailored to current and future demands.
4. It is therefore imperative that European education and training systems provide the right skills for employability and allow these skills to be better harmonised to promote increasing competitiveness, in order to improve European citizens’ quality of life.
5. In summary, the Commission recognises education as a key priority of European policy and stresses that the European Union’s greatest asset is its citizens. It therefore considers education to be decisive for a society that strives to be prosperous, economically and socially developed, and cohesive. This means that there is no room for complacency on this subject.
6. Lastly, it should be mentioned that this initiative was referred to the Committee on Education and Science, which examined it and approved the corresponding report annexed to and forming an integral part of this Opinion. It should also be underlined that the aforementioned report fully reflects the tenor of the initiative and must therefore be reproduced in full. This will serve to avoid repetition of analysis and consequent redundancy.

B) Principle of Subsidiarity

Given that this is a non-legislative initiative, the principle of subsidiarity does not apply.

PART III – OPINION

In the light of the information set out above and the report of the relevant committee, the European Affairs Committee is of the opinion that:

1. There is no reason to assess this initiative's compliance with the principle of subsidiarity;
2. This concludes the scrutiny of this initiative.

Palácio de S. Bento, 12 July 2017

Rapporteur

The Chair of the Committee

(Vitalino Canas)

(Regina de Bastos)

PART IV – ANNEX

The Report of the Committee on Education and Science

ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC
Committee on Education and Science

Report

COM (2016) 941 final

Rapporteur: Susana Lamas,
Member of Parliament

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Improving and Modernising Education.

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PART I – INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Pursuant to Law 43/2006 of 25 August 2006 as amended by Law 21/2012 of 17 May 2012 on the monitoring, examination and issuing of opinions by the Assembly of the Portuguese Republic in the context of the process of EU integration, the European Affairs Committee (CAE) referred the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Improving and Modernising Education’ to the Committee on Education and Science, for analysis and in order to prepare this Opinion.

PART II – BACKGROUND

II.1. Background

This initiative relates to a Communication from the European Commission (EC) on improving and modernising education. Its purpose is to set out the Union’s next steps in this area with the aim of achieving high quality education.

The Commission’s communication starts by underlining the crucial role of education before identifying measures, either in specific education sectors or across the board, to support the reform efforts required by Member States to improve and modernise the quality of education.

Education is of strategic importance to our societies and to economic development, and Europe’s greatest asset in terms of its prosperity and way of life is its citizens.

Quality education for all is a foundation for social cohesion and an open society. Quality education is much more than an economic investment. It is essential for personal, social and professional development as well as for life-long employability. It can also be one of the most effective ways to address socio-economic inequalities and promote social inclusion.

Education and training systems in Europe provide good results. Europe has made good progress in improving education overall¹.

However, there is no room for complacency. The recent results of the OECD PISA² survey confirm that a high share of 15-year-old pupils have very low basic skills in reading, mathematics and science. Furthermore, in view of employability, further efforts are needed in order to reach the EU benchmark for the employment rate of young graduates of 82 % to be reached by 2020³. Another key concern remains that many young people leave school prematurely without a formal qualification⁴, in particular in the group of foreign-born students.

Quality of education should be a reality for all students. Education systems need to be modernised and the quality of education continuously improved. Digital transformation is changing the job market and requiring new skill sets. Digital technologies will also offer new ways of learning provided that there is adequate access to these technologies. To reap the benefits of these trends, education and training systems need to respond better to these

¹ For example: an increasing share of young people graduating from higher education, with the Europe 2020 headline target of 40% being in reach.

² <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

³ Today, this share amounts to only 77 %.

⁴ The share of early school-leavers amounts to 19 %.

changing realities. High-quality education is essential to equip young people with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and mind-sets they need to help them to seize the new opportunities. Striving for improving the quality of education is a goal that is relevant for all Member States.

Efficiency needs to be improved: maintaining high-quality and inclusive education systems comes at a cost and requires appropriate funding. As a growth-enhancing type of public expenditure, spending on education has the potential to promote social fairness as well as an innovative and competitive economy, offering good employment prospects.

In 2014, for the first time in three years, public expenditure increased in real terms, reaching 4.9 % of GDP⁵. There is, however, no guarantee that increasing public spending automatically yields better results. Increasing efficiency is of utmost importance, i.e. to make best possible use of limited resources to ensure quality, equity, and performance.

II.2. Content of the Proposal

Modernising and improving the quality of education requires reforms which can only be approved for implementation by Member States. Their shared interest that these reforms make progress and yield results will bring benefits in the form of social cohesion and fairness, higher growth, employment, innovation and competitiveness.

In this regard, given that improving and modernising education is a key priority, the European Union can support Member States by identifying specific measures to promote their reform efforts in order to make high-quality education a reality for all.

II.3. Objectives

The focus of the present communication is on stressing the fundamental role of education in our society and its economic development, and on identifying ways to support the efforts of the Member States in order to modernise education at different levels.

Therefore, in 2017, the Commission will present specific initiatives addressing key issues in the fields of school and higher education. It will also present wider measures to drive reforms for better education systems.

- **Early childhood education and care**

Quality early childhood education and care is crucial to provide the foundation for personal development and continued learning. High-quality early childhood education is an effective and efficient way to promote social fairness.

The Commission will further *support Member States in providing high quality early childhood education and care and step up efforts to help them learn from each other and identify what works best. That will ensure an optimal transition for children from early education to primary schools.*

⁵ This EU average masks significant differences between Member States: the spending on education as percentage of GDP for specific Member States varies from 3 % to 7.2 %.

- **School and early childhood education**

Europe needs to develop and innovate school education. A close link between schools and their environment allows them to better adapt to specific local circumstances. The quality of teaching and school leadership is crucial.

Therefore, the European Commission will:

- draw policy conclusions and support the development of European and national policies to improve the use of resources in schools;
- review the 2006 Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning to update its current definitions, adapt to new needs in society and economy, attract renewed attention to learning outcomes and promote learners' competence development;
- support entrepreneurial mind-sets and skills (fostering a sense of initiative, creativity, innovation and responsibility) and entrepreneurship education through a dedicated action inviting Member States to encourage an entrepreneurship experience for all before finishing initial education;
- intensify work with the Member States, with interest groups and with industry in the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition, including the ET 2020 working group on digital skills to identify challenges and implement the best practices for digital education;
- propose a policy framework and a draft Council Recommendation on promoting social inclusion and common values through education and non-formal learning;
- actively support teacher education and continuous professional development;
- promote inclusive education through the further development of the European Toolkit for Schools as well as the use of Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 funds, including the support of an alliance of schools for inclusion to promote good practice in the area of inclusive learning (e.g. integration of migrant pupils and imparting common values);
- offer targeted and innovative peer learning activities to inspire policy learning on the governance of school systems (quality assurance, optimisation of resource use, transition of learners through education);
- use the European Social Fund transnational networks to exchange good practices, in particular, the Learning and Skills network;
- promote the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds for modernising education and training systems and ensure better access to good quality education and a reduced early school leaving rate;
- further develop eTwinning and the School Education Gateway to support constructive exchanges between teachers and other practitioners on what works in school education.

- **Higher education**

Europe needs to press ahead with the modernisation of higher education. The quality of teaching is a key factor to improve quality in higher education. The Commission will present in 2017 a package of initiatives in the field of higher education.

Therefore, the European Commission will:

- help higher education to better equip young people with the skills and competences they need for today's society, by supporting stronger cooperation for effective programme design and good policy. The Commission will work with Member States to improve the availability of data on graduate employment and social outcomes ('graduate tracking') spanning also across vocational education and training sectors;

- increase the contribution of higher education institutions to regional innovation, by building more and stronger links between universities, businesses and other organisations – linking up also with the smart specialisation strategies under the European Structural and Investment Funds opening up pathways between higher education and workplace;

- improve the interaction between research and teaching ensuring that teaching is based on state-of-the art knowledge and adequately recognised and that graduates have strong analytical and problem-solving skills;

- promote adequate and effective investment in higher education and support Member State authorities, the Commission will focus on three strands of activity in 2017:

- A review of effective spending on higher education by external experts coordinated with on-going work by the OECD, reporting in early 2018;

- An enhanced programme of peer counselling on funding system design, building on successful pilots in the Czech Republic and an exercise just starting in Slovenia;

- Action research to enhance the effectiveness of European Structural and Investment Funds in support of higher education. Led by the Joint Research Centre and funded through Erasmus+, this work involves analysing how higher education is being involved in implementing smart specialisation strategies and providing concrete advice to regional authorities and stakeholders on how to optimise activities to achieve maximum impact. Starting in two pilot regions, the intention is to extend the work further, based on the results of the current work.

- Improving support for Member States to drive reforms for better education systems

This communication places education high on the policy agenda. It is considered necessary under the European Semester of economic policy coordination to pursue education reforms; support Member States' reform efforts; improve cooperation across policy-areas; increase the focus on efficiency.

Therefore, the European Commission will:

- provide easy online access to good practice on 'what works in education', which acts as an user-friendly one-stop shop, building on and complementing existing online tools;

- support Member States' ongoing efforts in keeping up with digital transformation in education;
- offer strengthened and up-scaled tailored policy support to Member States through peer counselling, bringing together professional peers from national administrations to provide external advice to a country requesting support on education reform;
- strengthen the evidence base (in particular with the help of the annual Education and Training Monitor) and improving the quality of analysis (e.g. by promoting cooperation across policy-areas and involving bodies such as the Economic Policy Committee) to close knowledge gaps about the key factors underpinning well-performing systems.

II.4. Assessment of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality

Given that this is a Communication from the Commission to other European bodies and a non-legislative initiative, it is not necessary to assess these principles.

PART III – CONCLUSIONS

1. The European Affairs Committee referred this proposal to the Committee on Education and Science for an opinion.
2. The Commission's communication concerns improving and modernising education.
3. Since this is a communication, an assessment of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality is not necessary.

The Committee on Education and Science is therefore of the opinion that:

OPINION

In the light of the above recitals and conclusions and in accordance with Law 43/2006 of 25 August 2006, the present report should be considered by the Parliamentary European Affairs Committee.

Annex: Technical note of 12 January 2017.

Palácio de S. Bento, 24 January 2017

Rapporteur

(Susana Lamas)

The Chairman of the Committee

(Alexandre Quintanilha)