

Parliament of Romania

Chamber of Deputies

No 1/1111/V8

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Opinion

concerning the Commission Communication: Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes COM(2012)669

Having regard to the Treaty of Lisbon, in particular Articles 5 and 12 TEU and Protocols 1 and 2 annexed to the Treaty,

Having regard to the Constitution of Romania, republished, in particular Article 148 thereof,

Having regard to Decision No 11/2011 of the Chamber of Deputies,

Taking into account the draft opinion presented by the Committee for Education, Science, Youth and Sport at its meeting of 12 March 2013,

Taking into account the draft opinion presented by the Committee for Employment and Social Protection at its meeting of 19 February 2013,

Taking into account the draft opinion presented by the Committee for Information Technology and Communications at its meeting of 4 March 2013,

Taking into account the position of the Romanian Government, expressed through the Government Memorandum of 15 February 2013,

Taking into account the draft opinion presented by the Committee for European Affairs at its meeting of 19 March 2013,

Having regard to the approval given by the Permanent Office of the Chamber of Deputies on 25 March 2013,

The Chamber of Deputies, acting in accordance with Article 40 of its Decision No 11/2011 of 19 April 2011, hereby adopts this Opinion:

1. The Chamber of Deputies takes note that the Communication mentions the significant improvement in European education systems and cites in support of the finding the many advances in European education: the streamlining of curricula, the introduction of national standardised tests, the establishment of an infrastructure of literacy centres, improving digital literacy.

2. It also notes that the Communication recognises the following:

- 'Across the EU, reforms have streamlined curricula. They have introduced national standardised tests, established an infrastructure of literacy, maths and science centres, created teacher networks and continuing professional development and stepped up action to improve digital and media literacy. Nevertheless, underperformance remains and addressing low achievement is now urgent.'

- 'European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability, and are not working adequately with business or employers to bring the learning experience closer to the reality of the working environment. These skills mismatches are a growing concern for European industry's competitiveness.'

- 'Only six Member States have a specific strategy for entrepreneurship education'.

- 'Transversal skills such as the ability to think critically, take initiative, problem solve and work collaboratively will prepare individuals for today's varied and unpredictable career paths.'

The Chamber of Deputies notes that on the basis of the material presented it is not possible to draw a conclusion as to the possible causes of the state of education and the reforms it has undergone.

3. The Chamber of Deputies notes that the Communication provides a detailed analysis of the main segments of the education system. Ways of improving each segment are proposed in order to reduce the shortcomings that have been noted.

4. The Chamber of Deputies would highlight the following aspects, based on analysis of the link between education and society as it has developed in the past two decades:

- The growing presence of advanced technologies such as IT and satellite technology in professional and daily life has had a profound impact on inter-human relations and even the way in which the economy functions: new professions have appeared, new categories of social relations have been created: in the case of many of these, neither society as a whole nor education have had the time or the means of provide sufficient training for the abilities needed.

- Technical progress has accelerated, and it has become clear that there is a need for individual learning capacities that go beyond the skills of identifying sources and reading. There is now a need for metaknowledge, i.e. acquiring knowledge acquisition techniques.

5. The Chamber of Deputies notes that national education systems in the European Union have responded to these new challenges individually, and that there is a marked difference between them in terms of their flexibility and efficiency.

6. The Chamber of Deputies considers that the key question is: is it really sufficient, as the structure of the Communication appears to suggest, for the rethinking of education in the European Union to limit itself to improvement of the different segments, better organisation and modernisation?

7. The Chamber of Deputies considers that an alternative to rethinking education could be based on a profoundly innovative, and therefore more ambitious, theoretical approach, that shifts the emphasis from 'doing better' to 'doing it differently'.

8. The Chamber of Deputies notes that at present, certain national education systems present characteristics that make them stand out from a conceptual point of view from the rest of the Union. It is no coincidence that these systems are also the best-performing ones. One such example is the Finnish system, which is considered to be one of the best in the world.

In this context, the Chamber of Deputies appreciates the leeway that the Communication allows the Member States, but questions whether this freedom of action is not too little to ensure that the national systems that have been left behind can catch up.

In such situations, the instruments and actions provided for by the Commission Communication could prove insufficient. However, it is possible that the slower pace of reform in some Member States is due simply to difficulties in adopting the

recommendations set out in the Communication, caused precisely by the insufficient quality of the education systems in question.

9. The Chamber of Deputies notes that a preoccupation for profound educational reform is present in all the major competitiveness regions around the world, and the search for the causes of lack of progress is intense.

10. The Chamber of Deputies therefore considers that rethinking education in the Union should start from a new theoretical paradigm for education based on a new pedagogical approach, taking the new social realities as its point of departure. It should then establish a new set of policies on this basis rather than trying to identify individual improvements, even if these are also necessary.

11. The Chamber of Deputies stresses that in order to achieve an innovative new approach of the kind referred to above, the following aspects should be taken into account:

a) Economic growth is not simply a question of increasing the volume of accumulated material goods; it is at least worth recalling the issue of sustainable development indexes, which include many values that cannot be quantified directly in economic terms.

Therefore, the measures to improve education should perhaps focus not only on economic growth, but also on whether or not individuals are able to fulfil their dreams and society's capacity to provide such opportunities. A few decades ago the economist and Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen laid the foundations for just such an approach.

For these reasons, the rethinking of education in the Union should focus on attaining certain well-being objectives that go beyond what is measurable in macroeconomic terms.

b) While the organisation of the education system is important, individuals need to acquire the ability to teach themselves as early as possible in their lives. It has often been noted that children are able to assimilate knowledge that is much more complex and sophisticated than we would expect. This is acknowledged in the Communication, albeit in an indirect and veiled manner and with specific reference to open education: 'these skills are being redefined by the on-going digital revolution'.

The Union could adopt a more ambitious approach to this situation, by allowing a much more vigorous expression of small children's distinct and powerful capacity to learn, which was so well explained by Maria Montessori almost a century ago. One possible

response to this challenge would be to make new information technologies available to small children. However, there is a need for more than just computers for children.

Back in 1996, a renowned researcher into the use of computers for and by very small children (Papert) stated the following: 'Computers open up new teaching opportunities that are much more suited to the [psychological] nature of small children [compared to traditional teaching methods]'.
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IT technology should not be used only to provide new teaching tools, but also to provide an opportunity to rethink the education of small children.

c) learning from open sources has carved out a place for itself in recent years, with a significant portion of knowledge being obtained in this way. The Communication mentions the relevance of open education: 'Digital learning and recent trends in Open Educational Resources (OER) are enabling fundamental changes in the education world.'

The examples of open education that we have encountered so far i.e. documents and courses prepared for traditional education that are made freely available to the public, are for the most part passive.

If such resources were to become dedicated and possibly interactive, open education would take an important step forward that would distinguish it in a fundamental way from traditional education.

We are talking here about more than a new source of knowledge: this is also a new way of learning, which would require a separate didactic approach, and its consequences should be included in a new approach to teaching methods.

c) It is essential that society recognises the abilities and skills acquired during the education process. There is no system of assessment that can replace this recognition. Bearing in mind that knowledge needs to be renewed as early as the first year after the completion of university, it is clear that earlier assessments no longer have the same relevance upon the completion of university as when they were carried out.

Therefore, it is not hard to predict that assessment ends up being transformed from an internal process within a school into a largely external process controlled by other social structures, not necessarily institutions.

In certain alternative education systems that have been established in some Member States for decades (for example, in Germany there are at least 200 Waldorf Schools and a large number of schools that operate according to alternative education methods), internal assessment carried out by the school has no significant echo outside the educational institution itself or is different from the norm. Nonetheless, these systems with minimal internal assessment function successfully.

The Union should perhaps make use of a new conceptual approach to assessment, moving beyond the current approach of administrative reorganisations. In the interest of common European values, the youth of future generations should not be spent on gruelling preparation for testing and assessment that in any case leads nowhere.

d) It is possible that the definition and content of the profession of teacher (in the wider sense) has changed as a result of a transition from the role as knowledge provider to a new role consisting chiefly in the provision of training for learning; as a result, targets such as 'initial teacher education and career-long professional development... to recruit, retain and develop high-quality teachers' should perhaps be rephrased or explained in order to respond to this transition from 'teaching' to 'mentoring'.

The possibility of making more use than is currently the case of the direct transmission of experience should go hand-in-hand with the training of the experts that transmit these skills, by making them better equipped to do so, both within the organised framework of educational establishment and within the less formal context of life-long learning.

Therefore, the Union should perhaps address in equal measure both the ability to learn on one's own and the ability to teach others, particularly outside the remit of the profession of teacher (in the wider sense of the word).

e) The Communication lays down success indicators that are justified by the current state of affairs but which could rapidly become obsolete as a result of technical progress.

In this context, although it is understandable that each EU citizen ought to know at least two foreign languages, given the advances in machine translation this objective should perhaps be relaxed.

This would leave time to acquire other abilities that are sought after as a result of new social relations, such as the ability to work in multi-disciplinary teams under teleworking conditions.

f) Public funding for education is of course essential and the Communication rightly devotes an appropriate amount of space to it. However, it should not be forgotten that successful outcomes for graduates are not directly proportional to the level of spending. Much more important than the level of spending itself is the efficient use of the spending.

Therefore, it would be right for the Union not only to recommend spending a certain percentage of GDP on education, but also to suggest that the results of public spending in this field be analysed carefully.

g) The Communication stresses the benefits to society from investment in higher education; it should however be remembered that higher education draws its students from school pupils, from young people that have undergone prior education, starting from the pre-school stage.

In this context, instead of simply making administrative improvements or providing better funding, the rethinking of pre-school education and the early years of schooling should perhaps aim to prepare children for an education system that is conceptually and fundamentally new.

Countless studies have shown that adults' ability to understand is learned in early childhood. Therefore it would be perfectly justified to have an approach that addresses early childhood for the purpose of ensuring that young adults are educated properly when they reach higher education.

The Union should perhaps ensure not only reciprocal recognition of qualifications, but also a convergence in the objectives of the care shown by the State for the early stages of life as a premise for success later on in life.

h) The Communication does not refer to the role of the family in life preparation and in cooperation with educational establishments. In other parts of the world, this cooperation has recently been identified as the 'missing link' in ensuring educational success.

However, by 'cooperation' and 'success' we should not only understand specialised knowledge, technical knowledge or skills-based knowledge.

The emotional context provided by the family is also important in ensuring success. Therefore, the Union should try to ensure that economic development policies do not demand too much from families, and do not force them into abandoning their role as an

'emotional refuge' for the sake of excessive training or training for which there is insufficient professional demand.

12. The Chamber of Deputies notes that in most Member States there continues to be a risk that educational establishments above the compulsory education stage are either over- or under-subscribed, because the authorities do not inform young people about the substantial differences in employment prospects upon completion of their studies. There is a need to identify the diplomas that are preferred by prominent employers, and the statistics on this subject need to be disseminated on a systematic basis. If the authorities regard such action as little more than 'advertising' and leave it up to businesses, the effect will be reduced because target groups would regard the information provided as exaggerated even if it was accurate, by dint of it being advertising, and consequently ignore it.

13. In conclusion:

a) The Chamber of Deputies regards the document as a particularly useful contribution to the debate on increasing the competitiveness of the Union and for a Europe that is aware of its social role. It also considers that the preoccupation for the future of education in the Union is proof of its growing role.

b) The Chamber of Deputies considers that the next step in the rethinking of education should be to recognise the need to draw up a new pedagogical theory that includes the recent developments and trends mentioned above, or at least to draw up an innovative, coherent and unified conceptual approach.

c) The Chamber of Deputies considers that this could form the basis for much more ambitious educational reform, which would bring about profound structural changes to the system, thereby giving the resulting raft of policies a much better chance of success. Some of the new directions for rethinking education have been indicated above.

This is because the education system must be protected for the sake of future needs rather than present needs. What is deemed to be of little importance today may come to be crucial in the near future.

d) The Chamber of Deputies considers that the current diversity of alternative teaching systems is a valuable source of inspiration for the major change sought in education in Europe. Most were developed on the basis of the ideas of certain major educationalists such as Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Hartmut von Hentig, Paolo

Freire, N. F. S. Grundtvig, and many others. It is hard to imagine a successful reform of education without a solid and ambitious theoretical basis, which, it would seem, is yet to be devised.

This opinion is addressed to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission and to the Romanian Government.

PRESIDENT

Valeriu Ștefan Zgonea