Key competences are key for 21st century education systems

EPA Position Paper on the Revision of the 2006 Key Competences Framework

The European Commission is currently holding a public consultation on the revision of the 2006 Key Competences Framework. While the key competences approach is key to transforming European education systems fundamentally to answer the needs of the present and the future, the experiences and changes of the past 11 years require a radical revision of the current Framework. The most important changes we would suggest are structural ones, going beyond renaming or reorganising current chapters. To show the cross-sectoral complexity of key competences and to underline the need to have a holistic approach to education a matrix structure would be more suitable than the current list format.

The key element that has proven to be missing from the framework is a definition of the target group. In our opinion it should primarily target both learners and educators, but also policy makers and employers as secondary target groups. This of course should be linked to a full autonomy of educational institutions and a whole school approach where learners' and educators' (professionals' and parents') voice are equally strong in designing competence-based curricula. Once educators are defined as a target group (or target groups in case there is a distinction between professional and non-professional educators), it is also necessary to include key competences for the lifelong learning of educators as a basis for the necessary empowerment of these groups.

Recent changes to curricula and education frameworks in some EU countries also make it necessary to define the desirable implementation process. On the long run Europe cannot afford – either financially or socially - to have school systems that do not help the education of highly competent people, devoted and creative lifelong learners. At the same time there is a need to also acknowledge the diversity of learning environments, to endorse and embrace learning outcomes of diverse origin, especially learning happening in the family, in informal and non-formal setting and previous learning in other formal systems. These elements are missing from most current European education systems and the revision of the key competences framework is a good opportunity to include them. An implementation framework is also necessary to ensure that the framework is implemented and used in a sustained way, and it is not only the exercise of ticking off a list or an empty excuse used to change national systems as it happened in some countries, the 2012 Hungarian education 'reforms' being the most prominent of them.

The present framework clearly has some gaps and also some overspecified areas. It is necessary to make a distinction between key competences for all and desirable ones for most, while there should also be age-appropriate, education-level (primary, secondary, tertiary) and target group specific definitions supporting this. Since the publication of the framework the digital revolution has also influenced all competence areas, while the role of languages and cultural awareness have become more important and prominent.

In the EPA Manifesto 2015 parents have committed themselves to help create education systems in Europe that ensure a 21st century future for our children. Parents' associations across Europe and EPA itself are using the framework as a reference point in our policy and advocacy work to encourage the modernisation of formal education so that it will be suitable to support the educational job of parents at present and in the future, too. It is also used as a reference point in trainings to empower parents to become better educators of their children. It is also used in trainings to support the lifelong learning of parents themselves. Parents, especially those who wish to exercise their basic right to mobility promote the systematic application of a key competences approach to curriculum

design thus supporting a smooth transition between education systems and also to ensure the right to mother tongue and mother culture.

1. Communication in the mother tongue and foreign languages
Communication in the mother tongue has been the key competence totally neglected by countries implementing the key competences framework, and was implemented for majority language of the country. The right to mother tongue is a basic child right, while there is a clear need to acquire a B2 level of knowledge in the majority language for everyday life. At the same time it is questionable for parents if the language of instruction should be the same as the majority language of the country. More and more children and young people are using different languages for different functions. The role and use of mother tongue(s), majority language, English and other languages are to be better researched and the framework needs to be modified accordingly. At the same time new forms of communication are gaining ground, especially in the digital sphere, that are becoming essential 'other languages' for everyday life, the labour market and thus lifelong learning.

The only feasible solution to the above mentioned problems seem to be a multilingualism approach in which linguistic competences for certain functions are considered individually. Neither forcing the majority language nor a mother-tongue-only approach can be successful to strengthen the European project as the first has proven to be a total failure as 'inclusion' or rather an attempt to assimilate everybody into majority cultures of countries, while the later would result in even more exclusion. In our opinion we can only achieve our common European goals if we aim at inclusion rather than integration, and that requires a multilingual, multicultural approach

2. STEM
There should be an integrated approach to STEM in the framework, especially promoting an exploratory approach to one's immediate environment first and a complex, not subject specific approach to STEM.

3. Digital competence
As mentioned before this area needs a thorough revision to reflect the digital revolution and the major changes of the past 11 years. Digital competence became transversal and necessary to include in all other areas together with some others like critical thinking and problem solving.

4. Learning to learn
To educate lifelong learners – of current students as well as adults, including professional educators – is the key to the future and the next generations. Thus this competence need to be elevated and highlighted in the revised framework. This competence area is also an overarching transversal element that cannot be developed in any other ways than linking it to all other competences in a matrix structure. There might be a need to differentiate the description a little as it is not an achievable goal to make everybody able to learn on their own, but rather everybody would need to be aware of their learning styles and methods, and seek education that is conform with them. At the same time well-being and joy (best brought by a playful learning approach) are important elements in learning that lead to commitment, thus these should be emphasised in the description of this competence.

5. Social and civic competences
   Civic and social competences are not based on knowledge of concepts listed in the current framework, but should be based on a learning-by-doing process, on experiencing these from a very early age, that should be later reinforced by knowledge acquired. As the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is not fully implemented in some EU countries, it is also important to list international treaties that are adopted either by the EU itself (eg. Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities) or each and every Member State (eg. Convention on the Rights of the Child).

   It also needs to be defined what is meant by public domain. It is alienating for many people if it is implemented as a requirement for active citizenship mainly in the political field. At the same time aligning the definition with the whole school approach would also clarify the definition. In our opinion civic competences are mostly exercised on a community level, while it is also important to include active bystandership in the definition, the need to educate citizens who only become active if fundamental rights and values are violated. Civic competences should focus less on 'citizenship' especially to ensure inclusion in society for all living in Europe. Thus it also needs to focus less on knowledge, especially of institutional and regulatory frameworks, while focusing on human rights enshrined in in international treaties more. Recent political and policy documents all acknowledge the importance of inclusion and understanding, so this need to be emphasised more. As for democratic participation it is or should be made possible for all on local, institutional and community levels, especially in education, regardless the legal and citizenship status of the individual. It is also important from the point of view of mobile EU citizens who are often deprived of their right to vote nationally, while can actively participate in other forms and ways. Parents and professional educators must also develop this competence to act as role models for the next generations, thus key competences for these target groups are extremely important to be defined.

6. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
   The definition is more about intrapreneurial skills and needs more to re-name than re-define. While there are questions marks if everybody needs some of the skills and knowledge listed in the definition, eg. project management skills, there is a need to refine the definition to emphasise more the need to be able to take initiative, but also the ability to reflect, self-access and evaluate. This transversal skill could reflect the outcomes of the Global Workforce Survey on the necessary skills for employability as an important alternative to entrepreneurship.

   Skills and competences that need to be included are the 'soft skills' or non-cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving, the ability to collaborate in a team, the ability to plan, organise and prioritize work, as well as communication skills, especially verbal communication and obtaining and processing information, that are considered more basic and much more difficult to obtain at a later age. This may make it necessary to rethink the structure as they are more suitable for a matrix structure.

7. Cultural awareness and expression
   The most problematic areas of the definition are the willingness to participate in activities of artistic expression that is not an achievable goal, and the solid understanding of one's 'own culture' that is impossible to define. While the definition acknowledges local, national and

European cultural heritage, it fails to include universal elements and the need to have a view of the culture of other continents. It also fails to reference religious culture, an element strongly influencing personal values and traditions. Only understanding the diversity of all the previous elements can lead to a European value base.

The desirable inclusive, multicultural approach need to go beyond the skills, knowledge and attitudes sets of the current definition, but at the same time there is a need to redefine creativity based on recent research and practical knowledge. While elements of creativity are related to competence areas other than cultural, artistic expression has also become a more diverse issue. In the era of post-modernism it has been questioned if artistic creativity is still creation or recreation only. This again shows that not only a redefining of the key competences framework is necessary, but also a matrix structure should be applied to it.