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**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**

## IMPROVING AND MODERNISING EDUCATION

### *High Quality Education For All*

#### **1. Education is of strategic importance for our societies and economic development**

**Europe's prosperity and way of life are based upon its greatest asset: its people.** In a changing society and global competitive environment, quality education is crucial for the EU to ensure continued social cohesion, competitiveness and sustained growth. To be able to deliver on the objectives of jobs, growth, investment and competitiveness, with social fairness at its core, it is vital to invest in young people. Providing high-quality education for all is one of the best investments a society can make.

**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 employability over the lifetime. And it can be one of the most effective ways to address socio-economic inequalities and promote social inclusion. To achieve these objectives, education systems need to be accessible and give equal opportunities to all, irrespective of a person's background, and produce high quality outcomes.

**Education and training systems in Europe provide good results ...** Member States are primarily responsible for their education and training systems, and all of them have been engaged in significant reforms and peer reviews over the years. Europe has made good progress in improving education overall. This is for instance visible in the increasing share of young people graduating from higher education, with the Europe 2020 headline target of 40% being in reach. By the same token, it is a major success that the share of early school-leavers has been brought down over the period 2005-2015 by 30%, now amounting to an EU average of 11%.

**... but there is no reason for complacency.** The recent results of the OECD PISA<sup>1</sup> survey confirm that a high share of 15-year-old pupils have too low basic skills in reading, mathematics and science and that, most worryingly, the results are worse than in 2012. Cross-country comparisons show that some Member States need to reduce the share of pupils with very low basic skills (amounting, in some Member States, to above 30%). In view of employability, more progress is warranted to reach the EU benchmark for the employment rate of young graduates of 82% to be reached by 2020. Today, this share amounts to only 77 %. Another key concern remains that many young people leave school prematurely without a formal qualification, in particular, in the group of foreign-born students, for whom the share of early school-leavers amounts to 19%. This evidence points to a clear need to improve the performance and results of education and training systems. The recent influx of refugees also requires a swift response and an effective integration strategy.

**Quality of education should be a reality for all students.** A particular cause for concern is that students with a vulnerable socio-economic background are over-represented among students showing low achievements. Another challenge is to offer equal educational quality throughout the EU including in remote areas. This points to the risk that there is a divide within the education system. Education offers a unique opportunity to counter socio-economic disparities and gender stereotypes and make sure that nobody

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

is left behind. However, at present, European education systems are not effective enough in using this potential.

**Education systems need to be modernised and the quality of education continuously improved.** Globalisation and technological change open up new possibilities, for education and for work. Only a quarter of the school children in Europe are taught by digitally confident teachers.<sup>2</sup> 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 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. School systems struggle with providing sufficient key competences, such as digital and entrepreneurial skills or social and civic competences. This issue needs to be addressed. Striving for improving the quality of education is a goal that is relevant for all Member States. Even the countries that show good performance have no reason to rest on their laurels. Ensuring high quality education is a task that is never finished: it needs constant attention, improvement, and adaptation.

**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 GDP<sup>3</sup>. There is, however, no guarantee that increasing public spending yields automatically better results. In fact, comparing the results of PISA and the level of public spending on pre-school and school education reveals large differences in how efficient Member States make use of their resources. This evidence points to the critical importance of increasing efficiency, i.e. to make best possible use of limited resources to ensure quality, equity, and performance.

**Policy efforts to invest more effectively in young people should be enhanced.** The focus of the present Communication is on stressing the fundamental role of education and on setting out ways to support the efforts of the Member States, either in specific education sectors (chapter 2) or across the board (chapter 3). This Communication is part of a larger package of actions to support young people. The renewed efforts to improve and modernise education are closely linked to and partly built on the New Skills Agenda for Europe<sup>4</sup>, which was launched in June 2016. The actions set out under these initiatives complement and reinforce each other.

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<sup>2</sup> Survey of Schools: ICT in Education Benchmarking Access, Use and Attitudes to Technology in Europe's Schools (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/sites/digital-agenda/files/KK-31-13-401-EN-N.pdf>)

<sup>3</sup> 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%.

<sup>4</sup> COM (2016) 381 Final – "A New Skills Agenda for Europe: Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness". The Agenda focuses on equipping more people with better skills, making better use of existing skills and improving skills intelligence and information.

## 2. Better EU support to Member States in modernising school and higher education

**The EU can support Member States' reform efforts to modernise school and higher education.** In 2017, the Commission will present specific initiatives addressing key issues in the fields of school and higher education. These initiatives will be prepared in full respect of the principle of subsidiarity and in close cooperation with key stakeholders in Member States, such as the associations of learners, teachers, school leaders and parents, social partners, and civil society organisations.

### 2.1. School and early childhood education

#### *Early childhood education and care*

**Quality early childhood education and care is crucial to provide the foundation for personal development and continued learning.** The first years in life are of critical importance to develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Deficits in early development are difficult to catch up at a later stage in life. By contrast, high-quality education, provided early in life, is a strong foundation for acquiring skills more easily throughout the entire life.

**High-quality early childhood education is an effective and efficient way to promote social fairness.** It helps reduce early school leaving and low achievement and plays a significant role in overcoming educational disadvantage, giving children from a vulnerable socio-economic background a better chance for upwards social mobility. In addition, providing good quality early childhood and care costs relatively little and is much more effective than curative action later in life. This is why each attempt to improve education and the efficiency of education systems needs to start with a look at what happens in early childhood.

**Quality and accessibility matter.** Member States have nearly reached the benchmark of 95% set in the framework for cooperation in education and training 2020 in providing early childhood education and care, with an EU average participation rate of 94.3% in 2014.<sup>5</sup> However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and minority groups continue to be underrepresented.<sup>6</sup> Early childhood education and care can, however, only play out its positive impact on equal opportunities and social mobility, if it is accessible for all, affordable, and of high-quality. Meeting these objectives will require further improvements. In particular, it is essential to invest in well-qualified and trained educators, and to design curricula that stimulate children and foster their learning process.

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.

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<sup>5</sup> Education and Training monitor 2016 (ec.europa.eu/education/monitor)

<sup>6</sup> J. Bennet, 2012, Early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children from disadvantaged backgrounds: Findings from a European literature review and two case studies

## *School education*

**Europe needs to develop and innovate school education.** Many school education systems struggle to respond to the profound and complex changes our societies and economies are undergoing. There is a need for schools to adapt to the changing context, in which they operate, including the digital era and the increasing diversity among pupils. All these issues require not only the adaptation of school curricula, but more diverse teaching and learning to address the needs of all learners. Being part of one and the same educational system does not necessarily offer the same opportunities for all. There are significant disparities in the quality of education within the same education system. These challenges lead to an increasing pressure on the governance of school education systems to promote higher quality education and inclusion through sustainable innovation. Europe needs to make sure that the digital divide is not exacerbated and that adequate access to digital resources and infrastructure for all is ensured.

**A close link between schools and their environment allows them to better adapt to specific local circumstances.** It enables schools to strengthen their cooperation with local community and to offer more meaningful learning experiences for young people beyond school and formal learning structures. The right balance between school autonomy and accountability helps improve education systems and produce high-quality outcomes.

**The quality of teaching and school leadership is crucial.** One of the key elements in improving the quality, social outcomes and efficiency of schools is to give stronger support to teachers and school leaders. Teachers play a pivotal role in imparting knowledge and common values and in giving support to pupils who come from a vulnerable socio-economic background. Enabling teachers to cope with these challenging tasks, requires strategic investment in effective school leadership and a teaching profession that is based on excellent initial education, teamwork, and career-long professional development. Digital skills and competences need to be included in both pre- and in-service training of teachers and actively supported by school leaders.

The Commission will:

- on the basis of the new **2016 PISA data** as well as the **cooperation with the OECD**, draw policy conclusions and support policy development at EU and national level to improve the effectiveness of resource use in schools;
- as announced in the New Skills Agenda for Europe, review the 2006 **Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning** to up-date its current definitions and adapt to new needs in society and economy and attract renewed attention to learning outcomes and to 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;
- as announced in the New Skills Agenda for Europe, 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** in order to provide support and guidance to Member States;
- actively **support teacher education and continuous professional development** in the effective transmission of the common values on which the Union is founded;
- 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. The network provides a space for mutual learning across borders to help Member States and other stakeholders improve their policies and practices when managing European Structural and Investment Funds' investments in learning and skills;
- promote the use of the **European Structural and Investment Funds** for modernisation of the education and training systems and ensuring better access to good quality education and reducing school drop-out;
- further develop **eTwinning** and the **School Education Gateway** to support constructive exchanges between teachers and other practitioners on what works in school education.

## 2.2. Higher education

**Europe needs to press ahead with the modernisation of higher education.** The expansion of access to higher education in recent years has undoubtedly been one of Europe's key success stories. Nevertheless, responding to the demand for high-level skills society and in the economy remains a massive challenge for Europe's universities and colleges. Despite many examples of excellence and the commitment of staff, students and stakeholders, a recent public consultation by the Commission<sup>7</sup> revealed concerns about the mismatch between what higher education institutions are currently delivering and the skills graduates need to succeed.

**The quality of teaching is a key factor to improve quality in higher education.** Greater efforts are needed to invest in the pedagogical training of academic staff, which is an area that has traditionally been less valued than research output. In particular, the status and quality of teaching in higher education needs to be improved. This requires progress in developing, recognising, and rewarding high-quality teaching. In addition, the increasing diversity of the student population makes professional teaching ever more urgent. Teachers need to be well prepared and trained for being able to cater for students with diverse backgrounds, expectations and needs.

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<sup>7</sup> SWD(2016) 195 final

**The Commission will present in 2017 a package of initiatives in the field of higher education.** The modernisation agenda in higher education supports Member States, educational institutions, staff and students to improve education and training across the EU. To provide a solid basis for the future work, the Commission will present an updated<sup>8</sup> and renewed agenda for higher education in 2017, building on responses to the public consultation on priorities for EU cooperation that concluded in early 2016.

The Commission will:

- help higher education to better equip young people with the skills and competences they need for today's society, through supporting stronger cooperation for effective programme design and good policy. As announced in the New Skills Agenda for Europe, and as part of its efforts to improve the evidence base for policy and practice in higher education, 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 sector;

- 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;

- to 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 and 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.

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<sup>8</sup> On 20 September 2011, the Commission presented a Communication on "Supporting growth and jobs – an agenda for the modernisation of Europe's higher education systems" (COM(2011) 567 final).

### 3. Better support for Member States to drive reforms for better education systems

**Putting education high on the policy agenda.** Efforts to drive an agenda for improved quality and performance in education need to start by raising awareness about the urgency of taking action. As many benefits of good education accrue in other policy areas – such as social, citizenship, employment, economic or security policy – it is necessary to see educational reforms in a broad context. A debate at top-level can help trigger the necessary policy momentum for paying more attention and taking action to improve the quality of education systems.

**Pursuing education reforms under the European Semester of economic policy coordination.** Already today, the employment guidelines<sup>9</sup> contain a mandate to drive educational reforms, and issues linked to education are part of the work under the European Semester. The evidence-base on education under the European Semester could be strengthened further by making better use of the analytical report "Education and Training Monitor". In addition, it could also be explored how the OECD data on skills could be exploited better as an indicator or benchmark to monitor progress in improving the quality of educational outcomes.

**Supporting Member States' reform efforts.** The decision how to develop their education and training systems is in the hands of Member States. Modernising and improving education requires reforms that are based on sound knowledge about what works well in education. The EU level can help inform the policy choices of decision-makers in Member States by providing comparative data, strengthening the evidence-base, carrying out analysis and benchmarking, promoting mutual learning, sharing knowledge about good practice and offering targeted support, building on existing cooperation with several internal and external data providers, including the OECD.

**Improving the cooperation across policy-areas.** Given the inter-linkages between education and other policy areas, cooperation across policies could be strengthened. This could take the form of joint-up policy discussions, linking education with economics, finance, employment, social protection, health and inclusion policies, including regarding the integration of third country nationals. Education also plays an important role in preventing radicalisation leading to violent extremism<sup>10</sup>. Such cooperation would also be instrumental in improving evidence-base about what works well in education.

**Increasing the focus on efficiency.** Policy-efforts to increase the efficiency of education would benefit from combining the expertise of actors in the field of education and other policy fields, in particular, social inclusion, employment, economic policy and public finance. The aim would be to achieve better results. An innovative element would be to work together, for example, with the Economic Policy Committee, the Employment Committee or the Social Protection Committee. Building on the positive experience in the field of health and long-term care, the Commission services could prepare jointly with the Economic Policy Committee (and other relevant bodies) an analysis on education policies and systems and their efficiency and performance. Such work could also contribute to closer cooperation between Council formations, e.g. between the

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<sup>9</sup> Art 146 TFEU stipulates that Member States shall regard promoting employment as a matter of common concern and shall coordinate their action in this respect within the Council. In keeping with art 148 TFEU, the Council draws up guidelines which the Member States shall take into account in their employment policies.

<sup>10</sup> See the role of education in preventing radicalisation "Supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism" (COM(2016)379)"

Council for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council.

The Commission will:

- create an **easy online access for good practice** on “what works in education”, which acts as user-friendly one-stop-shop, building on and complementing the 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.

#### 4. Conclusion

Modernising and improving the quality of education require reforms. The decision to implement these reforms lies in the hands of Member States. At the same time, all Member States have a shared interest that these reforms make progress and yield results, from which Europe as a whole would benefit, for example in the form of social cohesion and fairness, higher growth, employment, innovation and competitiveness.

The EU can assist the efforts of the Member States. The present Communication places the improvement and modernisation of education as a key priority on the EU agenda. It sets out targeted action at EU-level which can support Member States in their reform efforts and help building a shared agenda to make high-quality education a reality for all.