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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**

Key competences for a changing world

Draft 2010 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of
the “Education & Training 2010 work programme”

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(Text with EEA relevance)

1. INTRODUCTION

Education and training are central to the Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs and a key element for its follow-up with the 2020 perspective. Creating a well-functioning ‘knowledge triangle’ of education, research and innovation and helping *all* citizens to be better skilled are crucial for competitiveness, growth and jobs as well as for equity and social inclusion. The economic downturn puts these long-term challenges even more into the spotlight. Public and private budgets are under strong pressure, existing jobs are disappearing, and new ones often require different and higher level skills. Education and training systems must therefore become much more open and relevant to the needs of citizens, and to those of the labour market and society at large.

Policy cooperation at European level in the areas of education and training has, since 2002¹, provided valuable support to countries’ educational reforms and has contributed to learner and practitioner mobility across Europe. Building on this approach, and fully respecting Member States’ responsibility for their education systems, the Council endorsed a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) in May 2009².

This 4th joint report focuses on progress towards agreed education and training objectives during the period 2007-2009. It is based on a detailed assessment of national reports and performance against a set of indicators and benchmarks³. The main focus is on the implementation of the 2006 Recommendation on Key Competences⁴. But it also provides an overview on the development of national lifelong learning strategies, and of reforms undertaken to make vocational education and training (VET) more attractive and relevant to labour market needs, and to modernise Higher Education. The report also takes account of newly identified challenges, notably those related to the ‘New Skills for New Jobs’ initiative⁵. While Member States did not explicitly focus reports on how education and training should respond to the economic downturn, the issues they addressed – notably the progress in implementing a competence based approach, and the modernisation of VET and higher education – are key to Europe’s successful emergence from this crisis.

¹ OJ C 142, 14.6.2002, p. 1.

² OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

³ SEC(2009) 1598 and SEC(2009) 1616.

⁴ OJ L 394 30.12.2006, p. 10.

⁵ COM(2008) 868.

The following trends and challenges emerge:

- (1) Despite a general improvement in education and training performance in the EU, the majority of the benchmarks set for 2010 will not be reached while, in the case of the vital benchmark on literacy, performance is in fact deteriorating. Attaining these benchmarks will require more effective national initiatives. The economic downturn serves to underline the urgency of reforming while continuing to invest in education and training systems to meet core economic and social challenges.
- (2) A large number of countries are introducing reforms that explicitly use the Key Competences framework as a reference point. Good progress has been made in adapting school curricula. But there is still much to be done to support teachers' competence development, to update assessment methods, and to introduce new ways of organising learning. There is a major challenge to ensure that *all* learners benefit from innovative methodologies, including the disadvantaged and those in VET and adult learning.
- (3) Implementing lifelong learning through formal, non-formal and informal learning and increasing mobility remains a challenge. Education and training, including universities, should become more open and relevant to the needs of the labour market and society at large. Particular attention should be given to establishing partnerships between the worlds of education and training, and of work.

2. KEY COMPETENCES

The European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning⁶, identifies and defines 8 key competences necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability in a knowledge society:

1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; 8) Cultural awareness and expression.

Initial education and training should support the development of these key competences to a level that equips all young people – including the disadvantaged – for further learning and working life. Adult education and training should give real opportunities to all adults to develop and update their key competences throughout life.

2.1. Progress in curricular reforms

There is a clear trend across the EU towards competence-based teaching and learning, and a learning outcomes approach. The European Framework of Key Competences has contributed considerably to this. In some countries, it has been key in policy reform.

Significant progress has been achieved particularly in school curricula. Traditional subject areas such as mother tongue, foreign languages or mathematics and science are being treated in a more cross-curricular way, with more emphasis on developing skills and positive

⁶ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10.

attitudes alongside knowledge, and with more ‘real-life’ applications. The transversal key competences are becoming more prominent and more explicit in curricula. In the wake of what was seen as poor performance by many Member States in the 2006 PISA survey, several countries have created strategies or action plans to raise basic skills levels, particularly in reading, maths and science.

2.2. Further development needed of the learning organisation in schools

While curricular change is generally under way, it is not enough on its own. The competence-based approach involves the skills and attitudes to apply knowledge appropriately, and the development of positive attitudes towards further learning, critical thinking and creativity. This represents a real challenge for the organisation of learning and depends crucially on the capacities of teachers and school leaders. It also requires that schools should be more explicitly responsible for preparing pupils for further learning as a core part of their mission.

2.2.1. Practical application of transversal key competences

There is a great deal of activity to equip schools with new technology and to ensure basic ICT skills as part of digital competence. However, young people increasingly learn ICT skills informally, and aspects such as critical thinking in the use of new technologies and media, risk awareness, and ethical and legal considerations have received less attention. As ICT use becomes more pervasive in people’s lives, these issues should be explicitly addressed in teaching and learning. The potential of new technologies for enhancing innovation and creativity, new partnerships and for personalising learning needs to be better exploited.

Learning to learn competences are also present in many curricula, but schools and teachers require more support to embed them systematically in teaching and learning processes and to promote the learning ethos across the whole school. Innovative methods such as personal learning plans and inquiry-based learning can be especially useful for those whose previous experiences in school have been unsuccessful or negative.

Similarly, the challenge when seeking to impart social and civic competences, a sense of initiative and of entrepreneurship and cultural awareness is to go beyond the knowledge component. Students need more opportunities to take initiatives and learn in schools which are open to the worlds of work, voluntary action, sport and culture, including through outreach activities with employers, youth groups, cultural actors, and civil society.

There is an increasing number of examples of promoting entrepreneurship through partnerships with enterprises or the development of student-run mini-businesses. Exchanges show that they need to be complemented by action to foster initiative-taking, creativity and innovation in schools.

2.2.2. Education of teachers and school leaders

The quality of teaching is the single most important within-school factor explaining students’ performance. There are indications that, in some countries, initial teacher education prepares teachers to use the key competences approach. However, the majority of teachers are those already in service. National reports and policy exchanges show little evidence of systematic efforts to update their competences accordingly.

According to the TALIS survey⁷, teachers have few incentives to improve their teaching and most common types of professional development activity available to them are not the most effective. The majority of teachers would like more professional development (particularly on special learning needs, ICT skills, and student behaviour).

Professional development for school leaders is vital because they are responsible for creating an environment in which pupils and teachers benefit from schools as learning communities. However, only few countries have obligatory in-service training for school leaders.

2.2.3. *Developing assessment and evaluation*

There is growing evidence of the power of assessment to contribute to effective learning and to improve motivation.

Minimum standards and centralised assessments are now used in most countries to assess the acquisition of key competences on a comparable basis, at least in general education.

However, most current assessment methods have a strong emphasis on knowledge and recall and do not sufficiently capture the crucial skills and attitudes dimension of key competences. Also the assessment of transversal key competences and assessment in the context of cross-curricular work appear inadequate. The experience of those countries using complementary methodologies such as peer assessment, portfolios, individual learning and/or school assessment plans, and project-based assessment should be further examined and built upon.

2.3. **More action required on literacy and the disadvantaged**

A good level of literacy is the basis for the acquisition of key competences and for lifelong learning and thus needs to be ensured from the earliest age. Therefore a continuing major source of concern is the deteriorating performance in reading skills compared to the 2010 EU benchmark. Inadequate literacy levels, particularly among boys and migrants, are a serious obstacle to their prospects for jobs and well-being. While most countries have special measures in place to support the acquisition of literacy, it is clear that more effective national action is required.

While the EU benchmark for 2010 is to reduce by 20% the percentage of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading literacy, this share has actually increased from 21.3% in 2000 to 24.1% in 2006. The performance of pupils with migrant background in reading, mathematics and science is lower than those of native pupils (PISA data).

A more personalised approach to learning by disadvantaged pupils is a clear trend. This is often accompanied by targeted action to support those with literacy problems (including migrants) and with special educational needs, or those at the risk of dropping out. But national reports appear to suggest that progress is slow, and combating disadvantage remains a major challenge.

⁷ OECD 2009.

There is a clear divide between countries that pursue the inclusive teaching of pupils with special needs and those that pursue segregated teaching: the percentage of pupils with special needs taught in segregated settings compared to the overall student number in compulsory education ranges between 0.01% and 5.1% (EU average: 2.1%).

Programmes targeting the early acquisition of basic skills, especially literacy and numeracy are emerging as a strategy in most countries. In some cases they are complemented by systematic early identification of learning problems and subsequent support to avoid that pupils fall behind or by programmes aiming to raise interest in areas such as foreign languages or mathematics and science.

While specific measures to address the needs of disadvantaged groups are common, some countries have created overarching legislative frameworks for both mainstream learners and specific target groups, including rights-based legislation.

2.4. Insufficient emphasis on key competences in VET and Adult Learning

VET has traditionally focused more on competences than general education. However, the full range of key competences, as defined in the European framework, is less systematically addressed by most countries' VET systems than it is by general education. In particular, communication in foreign languages and the full range of transversal key competences, which are increasingly important in view of evolving labour market and societal needs, should be given more attention. The challenge relates to curricula, teaching and learning methods as well as to the education of VET teachers and trainers.

Most countries highlight the importance of an efficient adult learning system. The aim is to provide adults with better labour market skills, social integration and preparation for active ageing.

Some progress has been made in increasing adult participation in education and training, but not enough to reach the 2010 benchmark of 12.5%. In 2008, 9.5% of Europeans aged 25-64 participated in the four weeks prior to the survey, with high skilled adults being five times more likely to participate than the low-skilled.

77 million Europeans aged 25-64 (close to 30%) still have at most lower secondary education.

Measures to support the provision of key competences to adults include new and revised legislation, improved delivery and governance, as well as specific funding measures. In line with the Adult Learning Action Plan⁸, attention is being paid to literacy, languages and digital competence particularly among low-skilled and/or unemployed adults and immigrants. "Second chance" programmes for gaining secondary school qualifications are common. Literacy and numeracy are also sometimes part of vocationally oriented courses. Combining such measures with guidance and the recognition of formal as well as non-formal and informal learning is seen as a key to success.

However, for adult learning it is also important that provision covers the full range of key competences, rather than concentrating on individual competences such as literacy or specific vocational skills. And it should cater for adults with all levels of qualifications, including the

⁸ COM(2007) 558 and OJ C 140, 6.6.2008, p. 10.

low-skilled, adults with special education needs and elderly people. The competences of adult education staff should be upgraded accordingly.

3. LIFELONG LEARNING STRATEGIES AND INSTRUMENTS

3.1. Lifelong learning an established concept

All EU countries recognise lifelong learning "from cradle to grave" as a key factor for growth, jobs and social inclusion. An important aspect in this is the level of participation of 4 to 64 years olds in education and training, which is increasing in almost all EU countries⁹.

Explicit lifelong learning strategies have been adopted by the majority of countries. Particular efforts have been made to develop instruments supporting flexible learning pathways between different parts of education and training systems.

The implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is entering a crucial phase. Most countries are making significant progress in developing national qualifications frameworks, covering all levels and types of education and training, and in referencing their frameworks to the EQF by 2010. This is linked to a broader use of learning outcomes to define and describe qualifications and of the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Measures have also been taken to further develop lifelong guidance systems, particularly for adults. The different guidance systems however still need to be better coordinated also to help young people complete their education and training and make the transition to the labour market.

3.2. Implementation remains a challenge

The implementation and further development of lifelong learning strategies remains a critical challenge. Strategies are coherent and comprehensive only in a number of cases and some still focus on specific sectors or target groups rather than the full life-cycle. To be effective, strategies need to cover sufficiently long time periods, provide opportunities at all age levels and be subject to revision and further development. To enhance their relevance and impact, and to motivate individuals to participate in learning, a greater involvement of stakeholders and better cooperation with policy sectors beyond education and training is needed. A key issue in the current economic crisis is the lack of adequate mechanisms to deploy constrained resources strategically, including to take account of new and emerging skill needs.

4. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

4.1. Attractiveness and quality are addressed

The core aim of the Copenhagen process - to improve the attractiveness and quality of VET systems - is being addressed, notably through the implementation of quality assurance systems in line with the recently adopted European Quality Assurance Reference Framework in VET¹⁰. This is a priority for most EU countries. A particular focus is being placed on the professionalization of VET teachers and trainers. Countries are increasingly using

⁹ See SEC(2009) 1616, chapter 1, chart 1.2.

¹⁰ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 1.

modularisation to make VET provision more flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and businesses.

4.2. VET provision needs to be more relevant

As set out in the New Skills for New jobs initiative, major challenges remain. The mismatches between skills levels and job requirements are likely to grow until 2020 if VET systems cannot respond more rapidly and flexibly to the expected increase in qualification and skills needs.

To improve VET relevance to labour market needs, work-based training is increasingly complementing school-based training. A number of countries without a strong tradition in these areas are establishing new apprenticeship schemes and developing cooperation with social partners for the planning and updating of VET provision. However, even closer relations with the world of business and a further expansion of work-based learning are crucial if VET systems are to adapt to the evolving needs of the labour market. More efforts are also required to develop effective tools for the anticipation of skill needs.

While increasing attention is being paid to opening up pathways from VET to higher education, faster progress is needed. Learners enrolled in VET still need more attractive qualification perspectives and mobility opportunities, and better support through guidance and language teaching.

5. MODERNISING HIGHER EDUCATION

5.1. Some progress on improving access and the diversification of funding

There is growing political awareness that enabling non-traditional learners to access higher education is central to the achievement of lifelong learning. Most countries have taken measures to increase the participation of students with a lower socio-economic status, including financial incentives.

24% of the adult population in Europe (25-64 years old) have high (i.e. tertiary level) educational attainment, which is far behind both the US and Japan with (40%).

Diversification of income streams in higher education institutions is increasing, with tuition fees the dominant source. Performance-based contracts and competition between higher education institutions, including for public funding, are also an increasing feature.

5.2. Investment and delivery of lifelong learning remain challenges

Increasing investment from both public and private resources remains a challenge particularly during an economic crisis. The initiatives of some EU countries in increasing and targeting resources towards higher education investment are welcome; further diversification should be pursued to lever-in additional funding.

Structural and cultural inflexibilities continue to represent the most significant barriers to strengthening the role of higher education in continuing professional or personal development for those already in the workforce. Higher education institutions should receive incentives to develop more flexible curricula and attendance modes and to expand the validation of prior

learning. Higher education must be firmly embedded in the development of overarching national qualifications frameworks.

Enhanced university autonomy and improved governance and accountability of institutions are crucial to enable them to open up to non-traditional learners and to diversify income. University-business partnerships¹¹ can create appropriate conditions for a higher share of private sector funding from enterprises and – in line with the "New Skills for New Jobs" initiative – help universities in developing curricula and qualifications which are more relevant to the competences needed for the labour market and by students¹².

6. THE WAY FORWARD

6.1. Boosting EU cooperation - implementing the new strategic framework

This 2010 Joint Report registers progress in a number of important areas and shows how European cooperation has contributed to national reform¹³. But it also identifies critical challenges, particularly relating to the full implementation of key competences and to improving the openness and relevance of education and training, which need further policy action both at the European and national levels.

The ET 2020 strategic framework provides a means to address these challenges. Their follow-up should form part of the priority work areas specifically foreseen during the first 2009-2011 work cycle of ET 2020, linked to the implementation of the New Skills for New Jobs initiative and the EU Youth Strategy¹⁴.

6.2. Key competences for all on a lifelong learning basis

Many countries are reforming curricula based explicitly on the Key Competences framework, particularly in the school sector. But innovative approaches to teaching and learning need to be developed and implemented on a broader basis, to ensure that every citizen can have access to high quality lifelong learning opportunities.

- More efforts are needed to support acquisition of key competences for those at risk of educational underachievement. Existing efforts aimed at providing additional funding for disadvantaged learners, support for special education needs in inclusive settings or targeted measures for preventing early school leaving should be further mainstreamed. The growing number of people with low levels of reading literacy causes the greatest concern. Comprehensive action is required at both the national and European levels covering all levels of learning from pre-primary through to VET and adult education.
- More action is also necessary to develop teaching and assessment methods in line with the competence approach. Learning must equip learners not only with knowledge but also with relevant skills and attitudes. Particular efforts are needed for those transversal key competences that are crucial for more creativity and innovation and for success in the world of work and society at large. The continuing professional development of all teachers and trainers and school leaders needs to equip them with the pedagogical and

¹¹ COM(2009) 158.

¹² See Eurobarometer No 260.

¹³ See also SEC(2009) 1598

¹⁴ COM(2009) 200.

other competences necessary to take on the new roles implicit in this approach. It is also vital to make the teaching profession more attractive.

- We need to strengthen those competences required to engage in further learning and the labour market which are often closely interrelated. This means further developing the key competences approach beyond the school sector, in VET and adult learning, and ensuring that higher education outcomes are more relevant to the needs of the labour market. It also means developing ways of evaluating and recording transversal competences, skills and attitudes that are relevant for access to work and further learning. A common 'language' bridging the worlds of education/training and work needs to be developed to make it easier for citizens and employers to see how key competences and learning outcomes are relevant to tasks and occupations. This would further facilitate citizens' occupational and geographical mobility.

6.3. Extending the partnership approach

To enhance citizens' competences, and so to equip people better for the future, education and training systems also need to open up further and become more relevant to the outside world.

- Partnership between education institutions and the wider world, especially the world of work, should be enhanced at all levels. Such partnerships would gather education and training practitioners, businesses, civil society bodies, national and regional authorities with a common agenda and within a lifelong learning perspective. Partnerships would also create new opportunities for learning mobility.
- More incentives are required to encourage higher education institutions to widen access to non-traditional learners and disadvantaged groups, including through partnership with outside actors.
- Learners should be given more and better opportunities to gain practical experience and insight into professional, civic and cultural life. To this end, work-based learning, apprenticeships and voluntary action schemes should be given a much greater role not only in VET and adult education but also in schools and higher education.
- The development and implementation of lifelong learning strategies should involve stakeholders and providers and include cooperation with policy sectors beyond education and training.

6.4. The role of education and training in the EU's post-2010 strategy

Investment in education and training is crucial as a way out of the economic crisis, both as part of long-term structural reforms and to lessen its immediate social impact. More than ever Europe's success in global competition is dependent on its skills and innovation capacities and a swift transition to a low-carbon, knowledge-based economy.

The role of education and training underpinning the knowledge triangle needs to be reinforced. Innovation and growth will be weak without a broad foundation of knowledge, skills and competences which promotes talent and creativity from an early age and is updated throughout adulthood.

Lifelong learning and mobility provided by high quality education and training are essential to enable all individuals to acquire the skills that are relevant not only to the labour market, but

also for social inclusion and active citizenship. The ET 2020 Strategic Framework alongside the New Skills for New Jobs initiative will, at the heart of the future strategy for growth and jobs, make an important contribution to the realisation of this overarching objective.