



Opinion

of the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions

Communication of the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

**Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes
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Confédération Européenne des Syndicats Indépendants

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As always, as the Commission states in the beginning of its communication, it is true that *“investment in education and training for skills development is essential to boost growth and competitiveness: skills determine Europe’s capacity to increase productivity”*.

However, this has nothing to do with **Education**, in whatever sense it is understood, whether from today’s viewpoint or in a historical context. But despite the many criticisms and feedback of experts in trade organisations in the Member States, the Commission clearly seems to want to ignore that fact.

Education is a task carried out by educational institutions – and thus by the state – directed at individuals. It is independent from posterior economic actions carried out by these individuals, but education must be taken account of because it thoroughly influences their actions. People must have priority, then the economy – not the other way around.

Unfortunately, the Commission has a different opinion. Therefore, under no. 1, one finds comments such as *“[e]ducation needs to [...] encourage the transversal skills needed to ensure young people are able to be **entrepreneurial** and adapt to the increasingly inevitable changes in the labour market during their career”* and *“the most pressing challenges for Member States are to address **the needs of the economy** and focus on solutions [...]”*.

The Commission has attempted to support these arguments with questionable figures. But why should the number of people completing higher education be increased to 40%? What is the justification for this target? Which higher education qualifications are meant? For example, in this context, do the German vocational qualifications count? And how does the Commission come to the conclusion that 20% more jobs will require higher level skills by 2020? Does that mean “higher” qualifications, or just different ones? And why define 2020 as the target date? Just because it ends a decade?

Of course, CESI fully agrees with the fact that youth unemployment is a huge problem in the Member States, especially in the ones that have been affected by the economic and financial crises the hardest and for the longest time, and that will only recover their economic stability and prosperity following serious efforts. Thus, the fact that the Commission should propose that efforts be stepped up equally in all Member States in the areas listed on page 2 is totally insufficient. This may be true for some countries, but in the Member States in which youth unemployment is over 20% and where the economy is predicted to stagnate in the mid-term, more encompassing proposals should be made other than *“promoting work based learning”* in the form of internships and public-private partnerships, because it is obvious that there are insufficient or even no jobs anymore.

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Concerning the individual points of the Communication:

2.1.

So-called “*transversal skills*” should be developed amongst school pupils, most “*particularly entrepreneurial skills*”. In addition to the fact that what is meant by these skills is not clear, this would overstretch the schools’ curricula and it represents an attempt – already mentioned above – to turn Europe’s citizens into the subjects of an economic system whose values are not called into question already at a young age. Who will decide what “*new and creative*” methods of teaching and learning will already be applied at primary school level (!): representatives of the economy instead of experts in the field of education with state qualifications?

The Commission cannot want this: in another passage of the document, it speaks of the need for high quality of school learning and abilities of the teaching staff.

Professionalism in the educational system in all aspects can guarantee the building of solid, specialised knowledge and skills, fulfilling the requirements for high quality professional skills in all jobs and creating the bases for flexible application and lifelong motivation to learn.

Another aspect which must be opposed is the reduction of efforts in educational policies to the so-called STEM area. Here, once more, the Commission is neglecting the importance of the roles played by humanities and social sciences, vocational training and jobs – and this at a time when in Europe, the obvious limitations of technocratic and financial policies should be visible to all, as well as the need for at least supporting social welfare measures and measures pertaining to social psychology.

Moreover, the full suppression of historico-cultural and artistic fields must be noted. However, the only way to promote a European identity as the basis of a trusting relation between the various Member States lies in their common, but also diverse cultural traditions. Shouldn’t this be strengthened by adapted, qualified educational offers?

The Commission is also being too narrow-minded when it limits its recommendations to mathematical, scientific and so-called “digital skills”. Many studies have now proven that the usage of smartphones or notebooks does not lead to long term learning successes, and thus does not prepare young people for the current needs at the workplace.

The Commission should be able to see the limitations of its own possibilities in the figures concerning the learning of foreign languages. Here, although the need for foreign language skills at

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the workplace on a daily basis is visible to all, and that the lack of such skills has an impact on job opportunities, practically no progress has been noted. But the Commission should make it even clearer to the Member States that they should do more to promote the learning of two or even three foreign languages across the board – by investing materially and by organising appropriate advertising and awareness-raising campaigns.

Overall, the comments about vocational training are positive.

2.2.

Measuring the success of schools and teaching by means of a *learning outcomes* approach should not significantly change the situation in Europe. In many countries, knowledge and skills have always been measured by means of different examination formats, which have acted as prerequisites for further qualification opportunities.

Ultimately, the recent discussions about the concept of competence has led to new reflections about these processes, without, however, having any new fundamental impacts. As a supporter of the competence theory, the Commission is consistent in terms of wanting to place learning outcomes at the centre of all objectives.

The comments on a change in the evaluation process are very vague: the reference made to “*the potential of new technologies*” seems completely trivial and the ones about the areas of “*problem solving, critical thinking, collaboration and entrepreneurial initiative*” call all the arguments into question precisely because they cannot be measured objectively and in a valid manner.

The Commission’s efforts to promote more mobility in Europe must be supported. However, the citizens of the EU sometimes simply want a solid and geographically close educational and training system or workplace, respecting the traditions of their own regions, independently of the decisions of economic drivers and resulting labour market developments. Moreover, despite all the worthy European mobility programmes in place, they often simply do not possess the financial resources to be able to take advantage of educational opportunities in another Member State.

The Commission is understandably optimistic, although not necessarily particularly realistic, when it assesses the situation in terms of the recognition of academic qualifications in Europe. The recognition of qualifications has not become significantly easier even within the Member States themselves and mobility has not significantly increased. Over the past years, the number of people moving to another country has not particularly increased, although many more have benefited from EU programmes such as ERASMUS and the like.

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We must agree with the statement that the image of the teaching profession must be made more attractive. The problem of ageing teachers, the shortage of teaching staff for some subjects, the partly very bad pay during teachers' working years and low pensions and the social recognition of the fact that teaching tasks have become difficult are true for the large majority of Member States.

However, the Commission does not provide an answer to how the countries could deal with these problems; it has not set any benchmarks as it has in other areas regarding objective criteria such as pay, teaching obligations, the significance or separation of the different branches of teacher training programmes, as well as the scope and contents of teacher training courses. In addition, the new challenges resulting from developments in terms of migration or the UN Charter aiming to promote the inclusive teaching of people with disabilities are only mentioned, but no suggestions or demands are made.

2.3.

The statement that *“any under-spending today will inevitably have serious consequences in the medium to long term in Europe’s skills base”* must be fully supported. The clear reference to the various situations regarding current financial room for manoeuvre in the Member States but also the long-term duties makes sense. But we are not convinced as to whether the priorities defined for implementation as described are adequate and they must not be viewed as final.

Partnerships between private and public institutions make sense in the cases in which financial resources can be used more efficiently through reciprocal activities. This could be true especially in the case of vocational training, but not so true for general education. In all situations, the involvement of the economy should remain secondary and the state’s responsibility for schooling and educational systems should be maintained. The direct impact of the economy on the educational system by means of collaboration in the curricula is highly questionable. As to a consultation process for vocational training, it could take place.

Overall, we conclude that:

- The arguments for *“rethinking education”* are neither new nor destined for a better education for EU citizens. Upbringing and education consist of more than the transfer of entrepreneurial skills.
- Once again, we are preoccupied by the utilitarian view of education and the educational systems.

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- No concrete and differentiated measures due to the different circumstances in the Member States are proposed to fight against youth unemployment. The suggestions to improve basic education and vocational training are therefore groundless.
 - There is a lack of precise proposals to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Thus, the important, even decisive players in the educational process are not given sufficient attention and this gives the Member States the possibility to continue making feeble efforts due to their budgets. After huge bank sector bailouts, there is nothing left for teaching staff and for children's and young people's education in many Member States.
 - The Communication does not mention any form of pressure that can be put on Member States if they reduce investments in education or remain below the defined level.
 - No forms of monitoring are named to assess the efficiency of the implemented measures, and there are no assessment obligations for example in the field of the personal or institutional reasons for early school leaving and long term unemployment amongst young people.

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