



**SOC/663**

**Promoting skills for a more just, cohesive, sustainable,  
digital and resilient society**

## **OPINION**

European Economic and Social Committee

**How to promote, based on education and training, from a lifelong learning perspective, the skills  
needed for Europe to establish a more just, more cohesive, more sustainable, more digital and  
more resilient society**

(Exploratory opinion at the request of the Portuguese presidency)

Rapporteur: **Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ**

Request by the Portuguese  
Presidency of the Council  
Legal basis

Letter of 26/10/2020

Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European  
Union

Section responsible

Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

Adopted in section

16/04/2021

Adopted at plenary

27/04/2021

Plenary session No

560

Outcome of vote

(for/against/abstentions)

219/1/1

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC underlines the importance of making efficient use of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and other investments to support economic growth and a resilient society within the **digital and green transition** of the economy, by improving the **quality and inclusiveness of education and training** (systems, institutions and programmes) in order to respond to the needs of learners of all ages and stages in their learning, to prepare them for life and work, and to ensure that all workers, as well as the increased numbers of people not in employment, especially women, have access to training. This will also help to safeguard the free movement of workers and services and ensure that **companies** are well equipped to handle developments in their industry and to close the skills gaps they face in the digital and green transition of industries.
- 1.2 The EESC recommends setting **achievable long-term goals and establishing a constant monitoring system within the European Education Area (EEA) for each Member State** aimed at achieving high-quality and inclusive education and training and lifelong learning for all and ensuring that everyone has the knowledge, skills, competences, and attitude needed for Europe to establish a more just, more cohesive, more sustainable, more digital and more resilient society.
- 1.3 The EESC points out that **democratic governance of education and training** systems – for example through **social dialogue** – within the next EU strategic framework is an essential tool for successful policy development and implementation at EU and national level. It needs to be secured, strengthened and involve meaningful consultation with organised civil society.
- 1.4 The EESC recommends that each future "**Open Method of Coordination working group**" should present policy outcomes, and preferably policy recommendations, to the Education Council for discussion. The outcomes of the working groups should be publicised, effectively implemented, and given a high profile at the appropriate policy-making level and amongst practitioners at EU and national levels; it is therefore important that the members of these groups include the relevant social partners and stakeholders active in education policy development, as well as representatives of school heads, teachers and students from each country.
- 1.5 To meet the **indicators, benchmarks, and targets** in the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Council Resolution on the EEA (2020), the Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabrück Declaration, the EESC proposes to **carry out additional research and an impact assessment to adjust the indicators and to add other necessary ones** which support countries in improving their reporting on implementation, as the full impact of the COVID-19 crisis on education systems, students and teachers is not yet clear. The indicators should also lead to measures that support socio-economically disadvantaged students and learners as well as those with disabilities with joint social and education policies at national level. Achievements on meeting benchmarks and indicators should be reported following consultation with the relevant social partners and stakeholders at EU, national, regional and local levels.

- 1.6 The EESC suggests continuing the key work carried out at **the presidency-led informal cooperation meetings on education sectors** (DG School, DGVET, DGHE)<sup>1</sup>, finding synergies between them, and raising their profile, with the involvement of the relevant social partners from each EU country and in consultation with the appropriate civil society organisations, following the example of the Advisory Committee for VET. It also recommends linking EU and national/regional policies together, in the context of effective partnerships between and governance by ministries, social partners and civil society.
- 1.7 The EESC calls for the effective implementation of the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) at European and national levels under the **Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights** to be adopted at the 2021 Social Summit, with the full involvement of the relevant social partners and civil society organisations, and with the support of sustainable public investment and the RRF.
- 1.8 The EESC draws attention to the holistic approach to education and training and the importance of taking such an approach to the implementation of recent EU initiatives on education (European Education Area), VET (VET Recommendation), skills (European Skills Agenda), youth education (Bridge to Jobs) and digital skills (Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27), ensuring that they contribute to equal access to quality education and training, reskilling and upskilling of workers for a just transition in the labour market, providing support to help low-skilled adults to find employment and to obtain entrepreneurship skills, and helping businesses to catch up with global innovation and competitiveness.
- 1.9 The EESC underlines that the implementation of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 needs to ensure effective social dialogue and consultation with stakeholders, respect and enforcement of labour rights, and worker information, consultation and participation in digital skills and entrepreneurship skills development, in particular in VET, adult learning and employee training to reduce the skills gaps companies face. With reference to the Court of Auditors' report, in order to meet the European Commission's target to increase the proportion of 16 to 74 year olds with basic digital skills from 56% in 2019 to 70 in 2025, the EESC calls for the allocation of specific amounts within future EU programmes, the definition of sub-objectives and milestones and the consistent assessment of digital skills in a constantly and rapidly changing digital environment.
- 1.10 The EESC calls on the Member States to ensure effective support for the employed and unemployed people who face difficulties in accessing quality and inclusive adult education and training **by ensuring targeted funding for those in need**, such as the unemployed, non-standard workers, the low-skilled, people with disabilities, older workers, senior citizens and people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups while taking into account the gender dimension.
- 1.11 The EESC proposes combating increasing inequalities in schools and the broader society by effective joint social and education policies at a national level. The EESC suggests holding **a joint Council meeting between the education and social affairs ministers** to find solutions to tackle

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting of Directors-General of School Education, Directors-General of Vocational Education and Training, and Directors-General of Higher Education.

educational inequalities and unequal access to education and training as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis.

- 1.12 While welcoming the targets set in the new Resolution on the European Education Area, the EESC proposes regularly adjusting the indicators and benchmarks of the EEA and adding other necessary ones (e.g. on green skills and competencies/learning about sustainable development) on which countries can easily report, including in order to ensure that national measures efficiently support socio-economically disadvantaged students and learners.
- 1.13 The EESC points out that it is vital to develop social competences for all learners from a lifelong learning perspective, to ensure that these competences are taught from an early age and throughout adult education, and to fight for tolerance and non-discrimination in education and training for all citizens. Teaching of key competences, especially social sensitivity, empathy, intercultural dialogue, citizenship skills, social competences, and entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship, should be applied across the whole education and training process.
- 1.14 The EESC calls on the Member States to use the Recovery Plan, the Next Generation EU and other EU funds, including Erasmus, ESF+ and the Just Transition Funds, efficiently and consistently to support education and training policies for a more just, more cohesive, more inclusive, more sustainable, more digital and more resilient society.
- 1.15 The EESC believes that the European Semester process needs to continue encouraging governments to ensure sustainable public investment in long-term commitments to improve quality, fairness, equality and social inclusion in schools, enhance equal access to digital material for all learners of all ages and support the safe use of digital technologies in schools and education institutions.
- 1.16 The EESC underlines that knowledge, skills and competences must be recognised and acknowledged, respecting each Member State's educational and professional requirements. Ensuring equal access to full qualifications is fundamental, and the EESC therefore calls for the implementation of the Council Recommendation on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>2</sup> and the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>3</sup>. The EESC reiterates its opinion<sup>4</sup> that training leading to **micro-credentials** should have quality standards and clear information about the value of training in order to be effectively used in the labour market as further training and be added to a full qualification. It is important not to overregulate micro-credentials in order to preserve their flexibility to the needs of the labour market.
- 1.17 The EESC calls for the implementation of the EEA at national level – following effective social dialogue with the teachers – to enhance the quality of teaching in the digital era, raise standards in teaching, develop higher quality and inclusive initial teacher education and continuous

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<sup>2</sup> [2012/C 398/01](#)

<sup>3</sup> [The Lisbon Recognition Convention](#)

<sup>4</sup> [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 40](#)

professional development, and ensure decent working conditions and salaries for teachers to make the profession more attractive for highly skilled candidates.

- 1.18 The EESC highlights the need to respect academic freedom and the autonomy and governance of higher education institutions in relation to their contribution to lifelong learning, and to ensure appropriate public investment in higher education and research, the inclusiveness and diversity of University networks in Europe, and respect for national and institutional competences with respect to higher education. The EESC calls for ideas on what has been called the "European Degree" and "European University Statute" to be further discussed with governments and the relevant social partners and civil society organisations and for support for the development of tertiary-level VET offerings.

## 2. Background

- 2.1 This opinion is a contribution to the Council discussions under the Portuguese Presidency (first semester 2021) on implementing EU initiatives on education, training and lifelong learning, in particular the EEA, Updated Skills Agenda and Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27.
- 2.2 Growing income inequality, human mobility and an ageing population are social factors influencing education and training policies. At a time when society is facing economic imperatives such as the digital transformation and the circular economy, support for individuals' learning might be one of the solutions for a more sustainable society, in order to overcome the obstacles and challenges of social and economic transformation while promoting skills to learn.
- 2.3 The leaders of the EU countries met at the Gothenburg Summit on 17 November 2017 to sign the EPSR and, on that occasion, started their first discussions on launching the so-called European Education Area<sup>5</sup>; this was followed by several new proposals on the subject from 2018 to 2020 and led to the new Council Resolution in February 2021. The initiative relates to the first principle of the Social Pillar, which stipulates that "everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market", as well as to the rights mentioned in the fourth principle including support for training and re-qualification, especially the access of young people to continued education, apprenticeship and traineeship.
- 2.4 The EC published its new policy package on 1 July 2020, including the Communication on a *European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience*<sup>6</sup>, a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on *Vocational education and training (VET)*<sup>7</sup>, and a Communication<sup>8</sup> and Proposal for a Council Recommendation<sup>9</sup> on *Youth Employment Support*:

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5 [COM/2017/673 final](#).

6 [COM/2020/274 final](#)

7 [COM/2020/275 final](#)

8 [COM/2020/276 final](#)

9 [COM/2020/277 final](#)

*a Bridge to Jobs for the Next Generation*. These policy documents linked lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling to implementing and achieving the EEA. The EESC followed up these initiatives by adopting opinions in 2020 on the Updated Skills Agenda<sup>10</sup>, Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee<sup>11</sup> and Towards an EU strategy for enhancing green skills and competences for all<sup>12</sup>.

- 2.5 In its opinion *Use-value is back: new prospects and challenges for European products and services*<sup>13</sup> (2019) the EESC expressed the view that innovative, highly-specialised products and services that catered to customers' needs, as well as to social and environmental sustainability, could become the essence and focus of modern European competitiveness. Therefore, it recommends policy interventions for relevant education and training services.
- 2.6 On 30 September 2020, the EC published a Communication on *Achieving the European Education Area 2025*<sup>14</sup>, focusing on six areas: **quality, inclusiveness and gender equality, green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and geopolitical dimensions**. The EU Education Council of 30 November 2020 underlined the importance of national competence for education and respect for the diversity of cultures and education systems, and queried the "governance mechanism of the European Education Area and the Union level targets proposed to be reached by 2030"<sup>15</sup>.
- 2.7 Adding to the previous policy initiatives, the EC's Communication on *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 - Resetting education and training for the digital age*<sup>16</sup> was followed up by Council conclusions underlining that digital education should be "learner-centred and support all individuals and citizens to develop their personality and skills confidently, freely and responsibly"<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. General comments

- 3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has been pushing the European economy into deep recession and pushing up the unemployment rate due to the unprecedented downturn of the economy and challenges faced by companies in the crisis. In spite of the widespread use of job retention schemes, supported by European and national instruments, unemployment in the EU is forecast to rise from 6.7% in 2019 to 7.7% in 2020 and 8.6% in 2021, before falling somewhat to 8.0% in 2022 ([Eurostat](#), 5 November 2020). The high unemployment rate due to the COVID-19 crisis is adding to increasing demands for skills and the upskilling and reskilling of the European

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10 [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 40](#)

11 [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 48](#)

12 [OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1](#)

13 [OJ C 97, 24.3.2020, p. 27](#)

14 [COM/2020/625 final](#)

15 Video conference of education ministers, 30 November 2020 - Main results: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/eyscs/2020/11/30/education/#>.

16 [COM/2020/624 final](#)

17 [2020/C 415/10](#)

workforce due to the **digital and green transition** of industry. Effective EU policy needs to support economic growth and a resilient society.

- 3.2 The COVID-19 crisis also accelerated the **digital transition in education, work and everyday life**. The EESC opinion on the Updated Skills Agenda underlines that "all Europeans should have the right to access quality and inclusive training and LLL within a just transition and in relation to **demographic changes**. We highlight the need to address **educational poverty**, which has deepened as a result of unequal access to education and training during the COVID-19 crisis."<sup>18</sup> Knowledge, skills and competence development need not only to serve the needs of the labour market and the prospects of total quality-based competitiveness but also to prepare learners to be active, democratic citizens and to help reduce social and educational inequalities. To this end, besides ensuring the improvement of EU citizens' digital skills, digital media literacy is crucial to ensure that citizens are able to navigate through the complexities of today's world.
- 3.3 It is vital that EU- and national-level policy measures ensure that **education and training are human rights and a public good** and respect the cultural diversity of Europe and that education and training policies are **national competences**. EU- and national-level policy needs to take effective steps to implement the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nation (UN)* and the *European Pillar of Social Rights* in order to achieve good quality, effective and inclusive education and training for everyone in every European country, by involving all the Member States, social partners and civil society organisations in the **Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights**.
- 3.4 It is essential that the EEA be about enhancing **further policy cooperation among the EU countries and continue providing a learning platform** for ministries, education social partners and the relevant stakeholders of civil society. Effective governance requires consistent education and training policies to be applied to every education sector from early childhood education up to adult learning, including VET for all age groups and linking of EU and national/regional policies together in the context of effective partnerships between ministries, social partners and civil society, within tripartite policy groups.
- 3.5 The EESC refers to its opinion on *Sustainable funding for lifelong learning and development of skills, in the context of a shortage of skilled labour*<sup>19</sup> and underlines that sustainable public **investment** in education and training and effective private investment in vocational education and training for all ages are prerequisites for the success of policy measures for social and economic inclusion of learners of all ages and support to companies. Therefore it is important that **the Recovery Plan, the Next Generation EU and other EU funds** (e.g. ESF+, Just Transition Funds) be used efficiently and consistently to support education and training policies in relation to the **European Semester**.
- 3.6 Since several **indicators and benchmarks** of the ET2020 Strategic Framework have not been achieved, the EESC welcomes the fact that many of the indicators have been strengthened in the

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<sup>18</sup> [OJ C 10, 11.01.2021, p. 40](#)

<sup>19</sup> [OJ C 232, 14.7.2020, p. 8](#)



EEA initiative. However, these indicators are highly challenging and require a financial commitment from governments. It is also essential to clarify the terms used as indicators by each country and to enhance education on a sustainable environment as a benchmark.

- 3.7 The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that schools are essential for students to be able to develop their **social competences**. Students should be taught to improve these competencies throughout their lives by means of learning to learn and active participation in society, by learning about different cultures, languages and, mobility, improving their knowledge of the arts, etc. These competencies are especially important as many historical examples have shown that economic and financial crises contribute to the growing trend of radicalism. Therefore the EESC would point out the importance of taking steps to further implement the *Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education* (2015)<sup>20</sup>, applying it to learners of all ages.
- 3.8 To improve the **green skills, competences** and attitudes of everyone in Europe, the EU Member States need to connect environmental policies to education policies and set up national green skills and competence strategies. The EESC notes<sup>21</sup> that indicators and benchmarks on green skills and competencies could be developed at EU level on climate change awareness, environmental responsibility and sustainable development in order to help countries incorporate green skills and competences embracing a transformative education approach into education curricula from an early age onwards, including in adult learning, as part of lifelong learning.
- 3.9 The EESC welcomes the fact that the **Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27** focuses on equal access to digital tools, the internet, and digital competence and skills development, in particular for women in STEM and IT professions. Effective **national and company-level skills and digitalisation strategies** should support workers with the provision of relevant and high-quality training. It is important that **companies also receive support** to ensure the upskilling and reskilling of their workers, in particular in the digitalisation of their jobs. This is also in line with the green transformation of industry – in terms of products and processes – being both a necessity and an opportunity for European entrepreneurship.
- 3.10 Respecting **full qualifications** is fundamental. As regards achieving **automatic mutual recognition** by 2025, the EESC underlines that knowledge, skills and competences must be recognised and acknowledged, respecting each Member State's educational and professional requirements, and access must be improved to updated information for students and learners on recognition procedures. To this end, implementation of the Council Recommendation on the *Validation of non-formal and informal learning*<sup>22</sup> and of the Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>23</sup> needs to be enhanced to support lifelong learning for all.

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20 [Paris declaration \(2015\)](#)

21 [OJ C 56, 16.2.2021, p. 1](#)

22 [2012/C 398/01](#)

23 [The Lisbon Recognition Convention](#)

- 3.11 The EESC welcomes the initiative of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 to create a **European exchange platform for digital materials and courses**. It is essential to provide full information to users as to whether courses lead to full or partial qualifications or to micro-credentials, who validates and quality-assures the online courses, whether and how they are recognised, and how they could be added to full qualifications. It would be important to list these courses in the Europass portal and to strongly consider copyright and ownership of the online materials, as well as the quality and relevance of the online courses concerned.
- 3.12 **Teachers** play a central role in providing quality education and training, yet – according to the OECD – less than one in five teachers consider their profession to be valued in society<sup>24</sup> and the teaching profession is on average 11% less well paid than other professionals with a tertiary level degree<sup>25</sup>. The EEA needs to provide effective support to teachers, trainers and other educational staff to overcome the negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis.
- 3.13 The inclusiveness and diversity of the *European Universities* networks of institutions, students and teachers involved need to be supported throughout the countries of the Bologna Process while respecting and safeguarding national and institutional competences in higher education.

Brussels, 27 April 2021

Christa Schweng

The president of the European Economic and Social Committee

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<sup>24</sup> [TALIS - The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey - OECD 2018](#).

<sup>25</sup> [OECD Education at a Glance 2020 OECD iLibrary | Introduction: The indicators and their framework \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](#).