



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/621

Teaching Europe – developing a toolkit for schools

OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Teaching Europe – developing a toolkit for schools
(own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: **Gerhard RIEMER**

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC interprets the **Paris Declaration** of 2015¹ and the 2018 **Council Recommendation**² as a **clear mandate from the MS supported by the EP resolution 2016**³ to put teaching and learning about the "European Union" firmly on the policy agenda. This is a new starting point for the promotion of a European dimension of teaching and providing the necessary support for educational staff.
- 1.2 The EESC believes that to a certain extent there is an **information gap in the education sector** when it comes to a general learners' understanding **about the role of the EU** and the impact that it has on the daily lives of European citizens. Despite the improved turnout - from 42.61% (2014) to 50.95% (2019) - the results of the recent elections to the EP show that there is still a strong need to inform and educate people from an early age about the European Union.
- 1.3 The EESC calls for a **new momentum of activity in the area of Education about the EU**. It wants to use the window of opportunity offered by the renewal of the EP, the EC and especially the new Commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport. The EESC is convinced that a special focus on EU education for young people must be considered indispensable for a progressive development of real European citizenship, needed to build a robust European Union.
- 1.4 The EESC is trying to raise **with the two new opinions the focus as much as possible on Education about the EU (SOC/612)**⁴ and **Teaching Europe at school**. It is important to think again about how to foster a better connection and awareness between, and of, people about the EU – its actions, aims and values. To achieve this, further efforts should be undertaken to better inform people about the EU during their initial school education, in particular, as well as in VET and higher education and in a lifelong learning context.
- 1.5 **Many measures have been taken at EU level and in the MS** to improve the situation and a variety of excellent materials and toolkits are available at national and EU levels which could be a source of inspiration for steering further initiatives. However, the clarity, accessibility and general information about what is available needs to be improved. The outcomes of the EC - Study 2013⁵ proves that there is an obvious political will in the MS to improve the quality of such information, but that there is still a long way to go.
- 1.6 The EESC thinks it is necessary to **undertake a new study, as critical research**, about the actual situation in MS regarding EU education in schools and in teacher training and CPD. An analysis of existing initiatives and curricula, especially in primary and secondary education, as

1 [Paris Declaration, 17.3.2015.](#)

2 [Council Recommendation \(2018\), ST/9010/2018/INIT.](#)

3 [EP resolution \(2016\) \(2015/2138\(INI\)\).](#)

4 [OJ C 228, 5.7.2019, p. 68.](#)

5 [Learning Europe at School, EC Study, 2013.](#)

well as of efforts undertaken by CSOs and the social partners, would be helpful. The study could be based on the Learning Europe at School Study of 2013.

- 1.7 In addition to this, an **inventory of the teaching and learning materials/resources** that have resulted from relevant EU-funded projects would be extremely helpful and necessary. A platform that pools together all these different tools categorised by language, age-group and topic – perhaps similar to the “what-Europe-does-for-me” website – could be used for teaching and learning at school.
 - 1.8 The EESC thinks that the **concept of curriculum should be considered more broadly** to include the co-curricular curriculum, which recognises the valued educational activities that support learning beyond classes and subjects to present the EU in the right perspective to youngsters and the population.
 - 1.9 The EESC considers that a **small toolkit (a basic "package") should be developed** for each school (learner and teacher) that would help to better educate all people about the EU. The contents of such a toolkit could take different forms and need to be adapted to the national and regional context, also to persons with special needs.
 - 1.10 To foster further political support for enhancing education about the EU, a **High-Level group of experts on "Teaching Europe"** should be established at the European level, represented by MS and integrating well-known experts. This group could provide policy proposals and recommendations for discussion by education ministers, which could lead to Council conclusions.
 - 1.11 **Teachers play an important role as “architects of the future”**. They need a better understanding of the EU and the competence to teach Europe to pupils at any age. There is a lack of knowledge about the EU and some are not experienced or confident enough to teach it in their classrooms. Therefore the EESC asks for a new focus on teacher training at EU and MS level, and to support teachers to use existing material and to make full use of the opportunities offered by the new digital technologies.
 - 1.12 **The EESC believes in the Vision** that young people who finish the school system do so with a basic knowledge of the EU, a **kind of “EU literacy”**. The EESC knows that it is quite a challenge but also an opportunity to teach around 72 million pupils enrolled in primary, lower and upper secondary education in the EU but one that is worth taking on. This includes the possibility for them to have the chance to visit European institutions. Teachers, too, should have this opportunity in order to gather special experience, to discuss with the different organisations and institutions (such as the EESC) and to return home with a better understanding of Europe, its role, values and how it is organised.
2. **A window of opportunity – a new initiative at the right time**
 - 2.1 The EESC wants to use the window of opportunity that comes with the renewal of the EC and the EP and especially the new Commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport to draw special attention to Teaching Europe at School.

- 2.2 In previous opinions, the EESC has stressed the importance of education about European history, values, democracy and achievements and the importance of the EU as a way to make the EU more meaningful to its citizens. The formal education system has a great influence on young citizens' perception of the world and is therefore crucial in developing their understanding of the EU.
- 2.3 This opinion acts as a follow up to opinion SOC/612⁶ to support, strengthen and intensify the call for action in the field of Education about the EU. In this opinion, the EESC wants to put more emphasis on Europe and education about the EU in general and especially on Teaching Europe in Schools.
- 2.4 The future of Europe and of the EU will be shaped and developed by our young people – by the students sitting in school classrooms today, influenced by their surroundings, families and friends. It is therefore important to get our young people closely involved in EU topics and to ensure that schools provide information, as well as critical and constructive discussions, about EU issues.
- 2.5 There is an information gap among citizens at MS level about the EU, how it works and what it does. This includes the role of the EU institutions and the impact that EU policies have on the lives of Europe's citizens. Educating people about Europe could either take the form of a specific subject or module, or could be integrated in different subject areas, as appropriate giving the freedom to national education authorities and schools, across various levels of education.
- 2.6 The role of schools and teachers and the extent and way in which teachers educate their pupils about the EU is therefore of increasing importance, especially in view of growing Euroscepticism in some MS.
- 2.7 The trend is for society to expect more and more from formal education at school. Such education, at least at primary and secondary level, should aim to provide pupils with the skills and competences that they need to think critically, to learn to interpret and analyse information and to develop their own opinions, rather than being a fact-driven learning process. This includes developing an informed opinion about the EU. Schools cannot do everything, so better coordination between the various structures of formal, non-formal and informal education would contribute to the success of the European project. It should also be said that the sooner young people encounter aspects of Europe and acquire an "appetite for Europe", the more they will feel "European".
- 2.8 At the same time, this places a certain expectation on teachers whose responsibilities are growing. It is therefore important to further support teachers by making EU teaching practical toolkits available, with a wide range of ready-to-use materials on different topics, appropriate for different ages and available in all EU languages, and taking into account specific situations in the MS.

[OJC 228, 5.7.2019, p. 68.](#)

3. The responsibility of the EU and the MS

- 3.1 There is no doubt that the main responsibility for education and training lies with the MS. However given its complementary function, the EU could play a stronger role in proposing special measures and activities to improve general knowledge of the EU. The EESC thinks that now is the right time to act.
- 3.2 On the basis of the Paris Declaration signed by EU leaders in March 2015⁷, the EESC interprets the 2018 Council Recommendation⁸ as a clear mandate from the MS to put teaching and learning about "Europe" firmly on the policy agenda. This is a new starting point for the promotion of a European dimension of teaching and the necessary support for educational staff.
- 3.3 The EU has been dealing very intensively with education and training in recent years, but also started recently with the topic of "Learning Europe at school".
- 3.3.1 In 2011-2013, the Commission implemented the "Learning EU @ School" initiative at the request of the EP. This was followed by the EP's resolution "Learning EU at School"⁹ in 2016, which emphatically underlined the importance of this subject and gave concrete recommendations for the EU and MS' levels which from our point of view still merit support and which should be a basis for new initiatives. The EESC acknowledges and supports initiatives of the EP and the Commission and hopes very much that this EESC initiative will give a fresh and strong impetus for a new way forward.
- 3.3.2 The EU Key Competences Framework for Lifelong Learning¹⁰ was updated in 2018 and defines the competences each European citizen needs for personal fulfilment and development, employment, social inclusion and active citizenship. As part of the revised framework there is a section on cultural awareness and expression. This includes developing knowledge of local, national, regional, European and global cultures and expression, including their languages, heritage and traditions, and cultural products, and an understanding of how these forms of expression can influence one another as well as the ideas of the individual. Inspiration could be taken from this to update school curricula as well as non-formal and informal learning programmes to educate people about the EU.
- 3.3.3 The Erasmus programme which was an incredible success, should continue to be an opportunity to learn about the EU. In the past 32 years, more than 10 million people have benefited from Erasmus¹¹. According to the Commission's proposal the new Erasmus programme 2021-2027 foresees a doubled budget compared with the former ones, from just below 15 to 30 billion and envisages providing support for activities that teach and explain the EU. There should be an

7 [Paris Declaration, 17.3.2015.](#)

8 [Council Recommendation \(2018\), ST/9010/2018/INIT.](#)

9 [EP resolution \(2016\) \(2015/2138\(INI\)\).](#)

10 [Council Recommendation \(2018\) \(2018/C 189/01\).](#)

11 EC, "[Investing in people](#)", May 2018

opportunity, for instance, for the Jean Monnet initiatives to support actions beyond higher education in other fields of education and training.

- 3.3.4 There are some other important and successful EU programmes for young people. DiscoverEU¹² gives our youth the chance to travel by train for free throughout Europe to discover not only Europe's stunning landscapes and to meet like-minded travellers but also to increase their independence and confidence as well as explore their EU identity. The European Solidarity Corps¹³ is another EU initiative that offers opportunities for young people to volunteer or work in projects in their own country or abroad and benefits communities or people around Europe.
- 3.4 The MS play a central role in education. The Commission's study (2013)¹⁴ shows that there is an obvious political will in the MS to improve such information, but there is still a long way to go. The study identifies what works to develop students' understanding of the EU and provides recommendations for the Commission, and the various partners involved, especially teachers. Some MS have integrated learning about the EU into their curriculum and teacher-training programmes. However there is very little evidence that what is taught about "Europe" is designed in a progressive manner to lead students from basic facts towards a more complex understanding. Also, the functioning of EU institutions and the decision making process, which is core to civic participation, is a rather neglected topic compared to other more basic facts. This important study, moreover, is based on data that is more than 10 years old.
- 3.5 Some activities going beyond the national requirements for learning about "Europe" exist in all MS. Schools, NGOs, foundations or universities that work with schools and teachers are already active in trying to improve the way in which "Europe" is taught. There are knowledgeable and committed organisations working on this topic on the ground across the EU. Many initiatives are EU-funded, but not all. The existence of these activities shows that there is a demand and need for further development to support learning about "Europe".
- 3.6 There are many on-going initiatives concerning information as well as civil society programmes, including social partners' initiatives, but the Commission's 2013 study¹⁵ shows that the information and the school programmes could be better structured.
- 3.7 The EESC's own initiative "Your Europe, Your Say" (YEYS)¹⁶ is also an example of good practice worth mentioning.

12 https://europa.eu/youth/discovereu_en.

13 [COM\(2018\) 440 final](#).

14 [Learning Europe at School, EC Study, 2013](#).

15 Ibid.

16 [EESC, Your Europe, your say](#).

4. **Political proposals and incentives for implementation**

- 4.1 The EU, especially the incoming Commission and the new Commissioner for education, culture, youth and sport, should consider how to develop a new momentum with MS in order to promote an intensive general discussion on the role of teaching Europe at school.
- 4.2 A new study on the actual situation in MS regarding EU education in schools should be launched to complete and update the existing activities to provide more evidence and evidence-based policy guidance. This study should be the basis for new initiatives aimed at collecting examples, comparing the different cases of good practice, discussing them and showing the results.
- 4.3 In addition to the new study the Commission should produce an inventory of all the teaching and learning materials/resources that the most relevant EU-funded projects have produced since 2010 on topics related to teaching about the EU at school (e.g. projects financed through Jean Monnet initiatives, with a summary description for each).
- 4.4 To foster further political support for enhancing education about the EU, a High-Level group of experts on "Teaching Europe" should be established at the European level, represented by MS and integrating well-known experts. It could be explored on a voluntary basis if there are common ways and means to educate people with basic facts and information about European integration. This group could provide policy proposals and recommendations for discussion by education ministers, which could lead to Council conclusions.
- 4.5 An **EU Day in schools in the MS** should also be introduced (on a voluntary basis). This new initiative would provide a focussed opportunity to discuss EU-related topics in an intensive, positive and forward-looking way in classrooms all across Europe and to use and implement the toolkits.
- 4.6 Civil society initiatives and programmes – as well as those organised by social partners - in the field of education on Europe should be welcomed. They should be involved in discussions, in the implementation, preparation and/or selection of good practice packages for thematic discussion at school; in discussions about the importance and the future role of the EU¹⁷. However, their impact could be much greater, if they are integrated in a broader agenda of school curricula and activities.

5. **Developing a toolkit for schools**

- 5.1 Many resources for teaching about the EU are already available from several sources. There is a huge amount of materials and toolkits especially at EU level. However, these are not always easy to find, especially if one is not aware of their existence. The focus should therefore not be on creating new teaching tools. Instead, existing ones need to be adapted, improved, and communicated (e.g. about Learning Corner). This could be done by creating a single online platform in which teaching tools from all these different sources are gathered.

¹⁷ [The Future Evolution of Civil Society in EU by 2030.](#)

Here teachers will be able to select materials based on the topic and the age group they are teaching, similarly to the "[What Europe does for me](#)"¹⁸ website that the EP created in advance of the 2019 EP elections.

- 5.2 Besides teachers, parents and other adults also have a significant influence on young people's perception of the EU. A toolkit for teaching about the EU in formal education should therefore be accompanied by lifelong learning opportunities for adults. In the light of the current issues with misinformation, this should include informing people of where they can find trustworthy information on the EU.
- 5.3 Developing toolkits is a shared responsibility, the main responsibility lying with the MS. Topics related to European issues should be scripted primarily at EU level and those related to Member State matters at national level. Books, videos, CDs or apps will include a national dimension alongside the EU dimension. How and to what extent teaching material is used has to be decided by the Member States and is the responsibility of teachers and their respective school.
- 5.4 A better and more intensive use of the existing material is crucial, especially existing links such as the EU's excellent Learning Corner¹⁹, where the presentation of materials is outstanding.

It has popular topics for primary and secondary schools with materials according to age groups, knowledge tests and quite a lot of specific toolkits ranging from activity books, factsheets, games and teaching kits to videos. The age groups go from under 9 to over 15. Pupils can find games, competitions and activity books to help them discover the EU in an amusing way. Teachers, too, can find sources of teaching material for all age groups to help pupils learn about the EU and how it works. They can also draw inspiration for lesson plans and discover networking opportunities with other schools and teachers across the EU. What is needed is better communication of information, together with the MS, on how to use this.

- 5.5 There is a huge variety of toolkits available at EU level. Using them depends on a range of criteria: the stage of education, the subject, the education system and the particular nature of education policy in the MS. However, the EESC recommends developing a basic package (small toolkit), concentrated only on topics, for each school in the EU and using it for a new intensive outreach. This package should be made available, in collaboration with the MS's education ministry, to the school concerned, together with material specific to that country and in cooperation with EU engaged institutions and organisations like the social partners.

The package should be available online, on the school website as well as via regional and EU contact points, and include e.g.:

- an easy-to-read, compact set of a booklet, brochure for teachers and students²⁰;

18 <https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/>.

19 [Learning corner](#).

20 The Austrian example: a small and short brochure different for teachers and students with all the European and national links to websites with a short comment on different topics

- a short video or film created for each country and made by people from that country;
 - a selection of materials offered at EU level aimed at teaching the EU at school. These should be geared specifically to the various school levels (nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary schools), as well as to the main online links, including the Learning Corner;
 - material from the MS with tangible examples of good practice.
- 5.6 The aspiration should be that each pupil and student who finishes the school system does so with a basic knowledge of the EU, a kind of EU literacy. The EESC knows that it is quite a challenge to reach and teach around 72 million pupils enrolled in primary, lower and upper secondary school in the EU. This includes the opportunity for students and pupils to visit European institutions and get an overview of the EU and its history (House of European History). Teachers should also have the opportunity to get in intensive contact with EU institutions in order to gather special experience, to discuss with the different organisations and institutions (such as the EESC) and to return home with a better understanding of Europe, its role, its values and how it is organised.
- 5.7 This "EU literacy" should be supported by a toolkit for the different levels, such as:
- At the primary school level, pupils should learn about the cultures and traditions of other EU countries, such as their languages, food, music, holidays, geography and traditional clothing and dances.
 - At the secondary level of education, students should be introduced to more "hard facts" about the EU and start developing a sense of civic responsibility. The toolkit should cover topics including EU history, the EU's main achievements (such as its contribution to peace), the EU institutions, EU politics, EU elections, media literacy and thinking critically about news stories and being an active citizen.
 - For tertiary education, the toolkit should provide more in-depth information, for example on EU policies, political structures, the economy, the labour market, social policy issues, mobility and rights and social partnership. This could also include tools tailored towards specific professional groups such as journalists or local/regional politicians.
- 5.8 The important and crucial role of teachers
- 5.8.1 Teachers play an important role as “architects of the future”. A specific programme for teachers is crucial, taking into account the specific situation and needs in MS. Today, many teachers lack knowledge about the EU and are not confident enough to teach it in their classrooms.
- 5.8.2 Teachers need a better understanding of Europe to be prepared for teaching Europe to pupils from an early age. One of the aims of teacher education should be for teachers to have a better understanding of the institutional process of integration and to be able to use the new didactic approach to make it clearer to their students. They will also need to deal with new didactic concepts of education.

5.8.3 The EESC welcomes the modernised and centralised platform called the Learning Corner recently launched on EUROPA²¹. Targeted mainly at primary and secondary school pupils, their teachers and parents, the Learning Corner gathers in one place games, quizzes, learning and teaching materials developed by the EC and the other institutions and focusing on the EU and its benefits for Europe's citizens. **eTwinning** is the largest teachers' network in the world. Over **680,000 teachers** have registered on the eTwinning which allows teachers to create joint projects, improves teachers' and pupils' competences and is crucial in building a European sense of belonging. Teachers should be better informed about this tool.

5.8.4 The EESC thinks that it should be possible that certain institutions which are financially supported by the EU, especially the European University institute and the College of Europe, provide training on European issues to all teacher trainers in the EU. In addition, Erasmus+²² students and Jean Monnet academics should play an important role in schools to act as ambassadors for the EU.

5.8.5 The EESC also considers it important that the EC has set up a Teachers' Testing Panel composed of one primary and one secondary school teacher from all MS, selected by the EC Representations. The panel advises on the content and style of the learning material being developed by the EC services. This could be very helpful in ensuring that what is offered reflects current trends and needs.

5.8.6 Beyond the teaching of Europe in the education sector, it is important that information is also accessible to the general public, for example in public libraries and other public places.

Brussels, 17 July 2019.

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The President of the European Economic and Social Committee

²¹ [Learning corner](#).
[OJ C 228, 5.7.2019, p. 68.](#)