



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Blended learning

Proposal for a Council recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education
[COM(2021) 455 final]

SOC/701

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Referral	Council, 30/08/2021
Legal basis	Articles 165 (4) and 166 (4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted at plenary	20/10/2021
Plenary session No	654
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	152/0/0

1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 The EESC is pleased that the proposal points out that "Education is a fundamental human right and a right of the child". The EESC also welcomes the fact that the intention of the proposal is to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and other important EU initiatives¹ that aim to enhance cooperation among Member States to make quality and inclusive education a reality in the green and digital transitions of social and economic life and the labour market.
- 1.2 The EESC again calls on "the European Commission and Member States to implement the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which is to make quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning (LLL) a right for all in Europe"², and to apply it to improve the provision of digital skills and competences with support for equal access to blended learning (BL) for all and sustainable public funding agreed with education social partners and civil society.
- 1.3 The EESC would refer to its opinion³ in which it requests that "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".
- 1.4 The EESC urges Member States to build on experience derived from education during the COVID-19 crisis, and to ensure that blended learning (BL) is carefully designed and practised in the balanced curricula with the support of suitable pedagogical tools, in order to ensure that an appropriate and innovative learning environment and tools are provided for all children. Member States need to ensure that BL is established to support the quality and inclusion of education, in particular for children in need. The concept of BL, although gaining ground and receiving more attention, still needs more research and study, particularly from the perspective of educational disadvantage, as well as for primary schools and early secondary schools.
- 1.5 The EESC notes that in order to ensure more autonomy for students in their learning processes, it is important that BL be available for all students, not just for those living in rural areas where access to school is not possible, or in tertiary education where independent learning is required by the students.

1 [COM/2020/625 final](#), [COM/2020/624 final](#), [OJ C 66, 26.2.2021 p. 1](#), [OJ C 221, 10.6.2021, p. 3](#).

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

3 [OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 27](#).

- 1.6 The EESC notes that in cases of non-school, project-based learning, the health and the safety of students, especially of VET students, need to be ensured. Long-term distance learning, in place during the COVID-19 crisis, has had a negative impact on the mental and physical well-being of students and teachers, as well as on pupils' learning outcomes. The EESC welcomes the proposal's emphasis on the fact that qualified mental health professionals need to provide effective support for the well-being of students and teachers.
- 1.7 The EESC calls on Member States to ensure that BL is included in their education strategy, following effective dialogue with the relevant education social partners and stakeholders in education, in a way that positively contributes to quality and inclusive learning for students, ensures access to good teaching and learning environments and the necessary tools and support for teachers, and does not leave students without support.
- 1.8 The EESC further calls on Member States to ensure that BL is not detrimental to the social value of education or the relevance of face-to-face teaching in education programmes. The experience of emergency online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the irreplaceable value of face-to-face teaching and of continued interaction and feedback between teachers and students to ensure quality and inclusive education. Relationships between students and teachers are a key factor in student motivation and learning, which should not be undermined by BL.
- 1.9 The EESC asks that Member States ensure that the development of individualised educational plans take into consideration student requirements for assistive technology. In addition, the EESC would point out that this necessitates teachers being adequately assisted by support staff, being familiar with these technologies, and being able to utilise them effectively to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- 1.10 The EESC emphasises the teachers' central role in BL. Staff exchanges, collaborative projects and individualised teaching is possible if there is adequate teacher working time allocated for this and if the school leadership supports it. It is very important to nurture a BL community to promote the value of teaching and training technology.
- 1.11 Additionally, the EESC would point out that to ensure inclusion and quality of education, BL should contribute to implementation of the "[Council Conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#)". In this respect the EESC calls on Member States to support teachers effectively in their preparations for providing support to students on quality BL, by improving, updating and making initial and continuous professional development more relevant to teachers' and students' needs.

- 1.12 The EESC welcomes the proposed measures to support teachers' IT literacy, such as digital upskilling courses, programmes and tools for teachers and the development and dissemination of on-line and on-site pedagogical modules and resources. Additionally, the proposal should support the right of teachers to receive up-to-date and accessible continuous professional development; this should be recognised in social dialogue and collective bargaining at national, regional and local level with the meaningful involvement of education social partners.
- 1.13 The EESC would point out that massive open online courses (MOOCs) are not necessarily interactive or based on good pedagogy. Therefore, it calls on the Commission to provide more diverse training support for teachers, trainers, school leaders and teacher educators on BL in the School Education Gateway platform, leading to certification. The technical resources and materials developed with the support of the Commission to be employed in BL need to be reliable, easy to use, translated into all official EU languages and unanimously accepted by all the stakeholders in the learning process. The EESC recommends that the European Teacher Academy projects also be asked to develop joint accredited teacher training programmes on improving pedagogy on BL. The role of micro credentials should be explored related to BL.
- 1.14 The EESC welcomes the fact that the proposal places emphasis on the well-being and attractiveness of the teaching profession and suggests that Member States employ more teachers to support the well-being of teaching staff. The EESC notes that the major shortage of teachers and unattractive working conditions and salaries⁴ have a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching. This can create an obstacle to the development of high quality and inclusive BL systems.
- 1.15 The EESC would point out that combining face-to-face and distance learning requires teachers to be creative and innovative⁵ and have good pedagogical skills. It is essential to design BL in such a way that it respects the workload, working time and decent working conditions of teachers and ensures that they have a supportive working environment.
- 1.16 The EESC recommends that democratic school leadership is ensured, wherein there is effective independence for students and teachers to steer their own learning and teaching process. The EESC points once again at the importance of securing and strengthening the democratic governance of education and training systems, which should involve meaningful consultation with organised civil society.⁶
- 1.17 The EESC notes that BL outside a formal education setting, e.g. informal and non-formal learning, needs to be recognised with effective implementation of [Council Recommendation of](#)

⁴ EC: Teachers in Europe Careers, Development and Well-being, 2021.

⁵ [EC: Blended learning in school education – guidelines for the start of the academic year 2020/21.](#)

⁶ [OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 27.](#)

[20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#). Indeed informal and non-formal learning plays an important role in supporting the development of essential interpersonal, communicative and cognitive skills, including, among other things, creativity, active citizenship and skills for a working life. Participation in validation processes needs to be accessible for everyone and be supported with sustainable public investment.

- 1.18 The EESC points out that well developed BL needs to be supported by sustainable public investment, highlighted as part of the European Semester and with the support of additional EU funds, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Erasmus+ and ESF+. Supporting access to quality online learning programs is essential for any learner. More investment is needed, especially to ensure high quality distance learning for VET students and to secure their access to tools and simulators which help them with independent practical learning in a safe environment and providing community lifelong learning centres⁷ and libraries.
- 1.19 The EESC notes that the growing use of digital tools in the framework of BL is increasingly endangering the data safety of students and teachers, as well as the intellectual property rights of teachers. Therefore, the Commission and Member States should provide sustainable public funding and put in place a suitable legal framework in consultation with education social partners and stakeholders in education, ensuring data protection and intellectual property rights in education. The EESC is concerned that the recommendation is envisaging that "no additional resources are needed" to implement the plans in the proposal. Funding can be a way to leverage co-operation in fields where there is no strong EU competence. Costs could involve hosting, maintenance and equipment costs for integrating a platform, hosting teaching resources, data security, equipping teachers and pupils, etc. The most disadvantaged students will suffer most if there are no proper resources.
- 1.20 The EESC calls on the Commission and Member States to address the proliferation of education providers and the expansion of the EdTech sector, which will be increasingly favoured by the implementation of BL in education programmes. The EESC calls on Member States to develop national regulations, including the possibility of setting up public platforms for online teaching and learning to protect the public value of education. In addition, public platforms should be implemented in meaningful consultation with education social partners and education stakeholders, fully respecting the professional autonomy of teachers and education personnel, as well as academic freedom and the autonomy of education institutions, without putting pressure on teachers or education personnel as to the educational material and pedagogical methods they use.
- 1.21 Given the importance attached to the whole area of BL, the EESC suggests that discrete measurement and differentiated data collection depending on age recognising the different

⁷ Downes, P. (2011). *Multi/Interdisciplinary Teams for Early School Leaving Prevention: Developing a European Strategy Informed by International Evidence and Research*. European Commission, NESET (Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training), Directorate General, Education and Culture: Brussels.

developmental needs of children and young people be developed for this recommendation; this should also allow information to be gathered on related metrics on disadvantage, such as bullying and early school leaving. The precise measurements can be developed in conjunction with the relevant partners. Similarly, as a consequence there must be clear reporting on, and monitoring of, the delivery of the recommendation.

2. General comments

- 2.1 The following opinion looks at the [Proposal for a Council Recommendation](#) on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education. This opinion also places an emphasis on secondary-level initial vocational education. The proposed recommendation does not advocate a mainstreaming of reduced educator presence in learning, neither does it encourage more hours being spent in front of a screen. The EESC welcomes the involvement of young people, which should be sustained and ongoing in the whole process.
- 2.2 According to a European Commission study⁸, "Blended learning is understood as a hybrid approach that combines learning in school with distance learning, including online learning. Blended learning is a flexible model that can support a project or course of study to progress, whilst not requiring teachers and learners to be in the same physical space at all times".
- 2.3 While school-based learning enhances learners' social skills, well-being, a sense of belonging, a sense of community and better personal interaction between teachers and students, and among students, well organised BL can help learners achieve more independent, individualised and self-directed learning⁹. It may have particular promise for arts related learning including video materials.
- 2.4 While the proposal describes BL as a hybrid approach, emphasising its flexibility and its potential to encourage independent study, further clarification is needed regarding the role that teachers and trainers play in the implementation of BL. In this respect, it is important to ensure that BL is implemented in curricula with a whole-school approach, taking into account the needs of teachers, students and their families. It is also necessary that BL be implemented during school time and not cause an unsustainable overload for teachers or an additional burden for pupils' families.

⁸ [EC: Blended learning in school education – guidelines for the start of the academic year 2020/21.](#)

⁹ Ibid.

3. Specific comments

- 3.1 The COVID-19 crisis has obliged students of primary, secondary and VET schools to be more independent learners. Schools and teachers – mostly without any proper preparation – have been obliged to adapt to emergency online and distance learning, using digital messaging, emails, online video-chats, and other means to connect to children in order to provide adequate teaching during lockdown. It has also been a significant challenge for children with disabilities, who are at a greater disadvantage when interacting through digital media. Governments, TV broadcasts, social partners, education and training providers, NGOs and individuals have moved incredibly quickly to support teachers in setting up virtual classrooms and collaboration platforms, but much more still needs to be done.
- 3.2 Given the huge impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young people and the education system, we must also be cautious about the timing of change. The return to in-person schooling needs time to be processed, and many young people need to get used to the return to "normal": too much change in too short a time may be destabilising. Children and young people have borne the brunt of the COVID crisis. Their education, socialising, economic prospects and mental health have suffered particularly badly during the pandemic. The priority in the forthcoming period should be normalisation and a particular focus on well-being, mental health and formal learning.
- 3.3 The EESC is expressing its concern regarding the possibility of how primary and even early grades of secondary schools can cope with BL, with these ages often lacking the necessary competencies to be active learners in a BL environment. They usually lack self-direction, collaborative skills, ICT skills, knowledge construction, self-evaluative skills and several other so-called 21st century skills. These skills are necessary for successful learning in a blended setting, and the absences of these skills in a learners' population are genuine threats to delivering quality BL. A principle that experimental moves to BL in schooling starts with older students rather than younger ones needs to be established.
- 3.4 The EESC is pointing out that VET students have missed out the most on practical learning experience in apprenticeships during COVID. A lack of access to broadband and IT tools, inadequate teacher-student interaction and a lack of appropriate learning environments have all led to more drop-outs, especially among girls and socio-economically disadvantaged children. Blended learning, therefore, needs to be carefully designed and deployed in order to ensure that an inclusive learning environment and tools are provided for all children. While the recommendation largely focusses on the primary and secondary education, also on secondary level initial VET, it would be useful to explore the potential for BL in the area of apprenticeships.
- 3.5 The proposal includes among its measures a direct response to the crisis "prioritising the physical and mental well-being of learners and their families", as well as "boosting the

development of digital competences of learners and families". In this respect, the EESC points out how important it is to expand the scope of ensuring well-being and improving digital competences to cover the entire education system, including teachers, trainers and school leaders in particular.

- 3.6 The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission is proposing to develop, in cooperation with Member States, specific guidance material, handbooks and other concrete deliverables, based on evidence, peer-learning activities and good practice. This will fill the gaps identified in support for the development of a BL approach at school and system level. Social partners and other relevant stakeholders should be also part of this cooperation. Every move, change or adjustment to education systems must be done with the utmost caution. We must be completely certain that such changes do not in any way exacerbate educational disadvantage and early school leaving, which are arguably the greatest challenges facing our education system.
- 3.7 The EESC is of the opinion that BL has the potential to completely transform both teaching and learning. However, while the proposal emphasises "the opportunities created by blending learning, including improving the quality and inclusiveness of education and training, and the broad competence development and well-being of learners", the EESC points out that the limitations in implementing BL need to be carefully considered. Especially in the rural areas and areas of poverty where infrastructure (lack of access to broadband and IT tools) and a supportive environment (home environment, financial background, etc.) are lacking for quality BL beneficial to students. Connecting to powerful and reliable networks, especially when all the family needs to connect for its activities is crucial. Moreover, not all students have sufficient levels of digital skills, self-discipline or autonomy necessary for following lessons independently and performing tasks without face-to-face interaction with teachers. In general, successful BL depends heavily on parental monitoring and assistance – especially for younger learners. This risks creating or widening inequalities in pupils' learning outcomes and contributing to a rise in the rate of early school leavers, as not everyone has parents who will be able or available to fulfil that role effectively.
- 3.8 While education systems have been experiencing a growing move towards privatisation in recent years, BL should be implemented in education programmes in such a way that it protects accountability and transparency in the governance of public education systems from the influence of private and commercial interests and players. Education as a public good must not be undermined by BL.
- 3.9 Prior to COVID-19, educators faced the challenge of a growing learning gap among pupils due to various socio-economic pressures. Other factors include racism, segregation and a general decline in upward mobility and a downturn in the global economy. Generally, there has also been an increased reliance on homework, for example, which only serves to widen achievement gaps. Isolation and self-learning likewise have detrimental psychological effects. For many students, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds,

face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers offers a source of comfort and helps reduce the learning gap. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this learning gap, including the digital skill gap, with more students at risk of suffering from learning loss.

- 3.10 The EESC would draw attention to the fact that the initial education and continuous professional development of teachers does not do enough to provide teachers with the appropriate skills, including digital skills, pedagogical methods or teaching materials to teach through BL. This applies especially when working with special needs students, in a multicultural setting, or with disadvantaged students, which is even more problematic than usual, as it penalises precisely those groups of learners who need extra support in the current situation. The European Disability Forum [calls for](#) equal access to education services for employees and students with disabilities, and the provision of measures like sign interpretation, live captioning and adapted work.
- 3.11 Self-assessment tools mentioned in the proposal, such as the upcoming SELFIE tool for teachers, have the potential to support the implementation of BL. However, the EESC would draw attention to the risk that these tools may create benchmarking among education institutions with a view to setting up school rankings, leagues and competitions. It is important that the implementation of BL respects the specific features of any education institutions and priorities as regards the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), which should be subject to the agreement of teachers, trainers and school leaders.
- 3.12 Increasingly, work with children and young people needs to be based on real ongoing participation of those concerned, in line with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Apart from one consultation, there is no great emphasis on the views of children in the recommendation. This gap should be addressed. Many Member States are developing models of best practice and the EU is developing its own rights of the child strategy. This type of change should eventually be evident in school management and evaluation.

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