

## **ETUC Position on the European Commission Communication on Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes**

Adopted at the ETUC Executive Committee Meeting of 5-6 March 2013

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### **Background**

The Communication of the European Commission on Rethinking Education was published by the European Commission on 20 November 2012, accompanied by seven staff working documents: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking_en.htm). The Communication will be integrated into Council conclusions, which will be adopted by the Education Council on 15th February 2013.

The objective of the Communication is to identify and recommend priorities in education in order to meet the current and future challenges concerning funding of education, high rates of youth unemployment and needs for better skills and competences on the labour market. The priorities are in line with the Country Specific Recommendations of the Annual Growth Survey 2012.

The Commission suggests several initiatives in accommodating challenges linked to education and employment:

- Enhanced focus on the development of transversal skills, in particular:
- Entrepreneurial skills
- Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related skills
- Language skills
- Improvement of the VET-systems with the promotion of work-based learning including quality traineeships and apprenticeships to reduce skills shortages.
- Stronger assessment of teaching and of skills obtained in and outside of schools.
- Scaling up the use of ICT in learning and teaching.
- More focus on recruiting and retraining teachers and trainers in initial and continuous VET by developing a competence framework or professional profile for teachers.
- Further investment in education and training at all levels of education.
- Investigation of the possibilities of cost-sharing with companies, via public-private partnerships and tuition fees.

The seven staff working documents are as follows:

- **An Education and Training Monitor 2012**, which is to be an annual Commission survey with a focus on EU Member States' shortcomings or achievements in pursuing the Europe 2020 objectives for education and training at the national levels.

- **Country Analysis**, which gives an overview on the main challenges to skills provision in the different EU Member States with a focus on measures taken at national levels to respond to the particular challenges.
- **Language Competences**: A new benchmark on foreign language learning is suggested: by 2020 at least 50% of 15 year old students should have knowledge of a first foreign language (up from 42% today) and at least 75% should study a second foreign language (61% today).
- **Partnerships and Flexible Pathways**: the Commission invites Member States to think out of the box when it comes to the funding of education and to include all kinds of stakeholders to be part of the policy approach on education.
- **Assessment of Key Competences**: This should be based on the 2006 European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning with a focus on the development of transversal and basic skills at all levels, with a concentration on entrepreneurial and ICT skills.
- **Vocational Education and Training Skills**: Economic growth could be achieved through VET by focusing on skills-development for VET-students and VET teachers and trainers. Incentives are proposed to expand the “dual system” to EU-countries, as well as establishing European Sector Skills Councils and Sector Skills Alliances.
- **Supporting the Teaching Profession**: 10 key actions are proposed in the document to support the teaching profession concerning competences required from teachers; a re-designing of the recruitment systems; further support in their induction phase; improvement of possibilities for professional development.

This paper sets out the ETUC’s position on the Commission’s Communication, following consultations with the ETUC member organisations from December 2012 to February 2013.

### **ETUC Position**

The ETUC considers the Communication of the European Commission on Rethinking Education essential to improving the lifelong learning and labour market situation in the European Union during the economic and financial crisis.

The ETUC welcomes the fact that in the Communication the European Commission seeks to contribute to achieving higher levels of employment during the economic and financial crisis by improving the quality as well as the access to education. The objectives put forward by the Commission in its Communication, such as combating high unemployment for young people, addressing the shortages of teachers and trainers and the need for higher skills levels in the future, are indeed still to be reached.

The ETUC particularly agrees with the objective of making European VET-systems world-class by expanding the supply of traineeships and apprenticeships and by promoting work-based learning, which will make the VET-system more attractive to young people – especially those young people who potentially might be early school leavers and/or unemployed.

The ETUC also welcomes the fact that addressing the shortages of teachers and trainers, achieving high quality and accessible early childhood education and better

VET-systems, and supporting teacher educators are among the objectives of the Communication.

The ETUC deplores the fact that there was no consultation with the social partners on the draft text of the Communication, which demonstrates that effective social dialogue on European and national education and training issues is still lacking. Furthermore, at the end of the policy document, the Commission does not specify that social partners, and the trade unions representing the teaching profession, should be the ones the Member States should consult on the priorities set up by the communication<sup>1</sup>. The absence of social dialogue on education at the European and national levels is unacceptable from the ETUC's point of view, and we urge the Commission to improve the role of the social partners in its policymaking.

Creating partnerships in education would be an excellent approach to solving the difficulties of education and training, especially if it involved the social partners as allies. Social partners have a great interest in and a positive impact on education and training, as well as on education policy and can make a crucial contribution to improving them. Trade unions have wide-ranging activities in VET, recognition of skills and competences, skills mismatches, and organising and ensuring quality in work-based and workplace learning, through tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, sectoral skills councils, as well as collective bargaining, at all levels.

The ETUC reminds the European Commission that the role of education is much broader than simply fulfilling the economic targets of European and national strategies and this kind of "rethinking" or redefining of the purposes of education is unacceptable. The ETUC stresses that education should prepare individuals both for life and for the labour market and it should be independent from continuously changing economic and ideological objectives. The quality and quantity of education and training must be maintained during the economic and financial crisis, which should not affect education through budget cuts. We would like to stress that the European Commission should not alter the long-term objectives of education, and training and that work-based or workplace learning are the ones which should provide the special skills to people, which the labour market requires for the short-term.

EU policy in the context of education should not only concentrate on employability, but also focus on enhancing the chances of vulnerable groups to receive quality education. This implies considering carefully the needs of migrants, socially disadvantaged groups and the unemployed, and addressing these groups' specific needs in educational reform. Lifelong learning should contribute to keeping people in employment. Furthermore, it is essential to invest and improve people's language competences in order to enhance employability through voluntary mobility paths as well.

The ETUC questions the deterministic link drawn by the Commission between education and job creation. Education and the development of skills and competences are necessary but not sufficient conditions for creating new jobs and new economic growth, because they would only serve the short term goals of the labour market. The ETUC believes that the European Union will not be able to create more jobs or overcome the economic and financial crisis only by redefining education or by making further demands on it.

The European Commission states that "skills determine Europe's capacity to increase productivity" and that "Europe will only resume growth through higher productivity and

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<sup>1</sup> "At national level, Member States are now invited to pursue their reflections on this document through debates with their Parliaments and relevant stakeholders in order to press ahead with reforms." (*Communication on Rethinking Education*, p. 17.)

the supply of highly skilled workers, and it is the reform of education and training systems which is essential to achieving this". While the ETUC agrees that improving skills and competencies may contribute to boosting the labour market, it disagrees with the view that better economic productivity will be achieved solely by improving skills, as suggested by the European Commission. The ETUC considers that this policy is inaccurate, as improving skills and competencies alone will not solve the problem of unemployment, especially of women and older citizens, who, regardless of the level of their qualifications, are still the most disadvantaged in the labour market.

Instead of setting up new priorities and tools in the education field, the ETUC asks the European Commission to put more effort into achieving the EU 2020 strategies. 75% of 20-64 year-olds to be employed, reduction of school drop-out rates below 10%, at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds to complete third level education, and a reduction of at least 20 million people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion, are the most important targets which have not yet been reached, and are even less likely to be so during the economic and financial crisis.

The ETUC also requires better coordination between EU educational bodies and the development of synergies between the numerous EU tools as well as making them comprehensible and practical instruments for use by citizens (EU Vacancy Monitor, EU Skills Panorama; Europass tools; EU quality assurance tools: EQF, EQAVET, and ECVET; etc). The work of the Advisory Committee for VET (ACVT) and the meeting of the Directorate-Generals for VET (DGVT) should be rationalised and ACVT should provide advice on policy planning to the European Commission. The discussions and results of the European Commission's social dialogue committees and working groups on education and training issues should be taken into consideration at EU-level events and policy making.

From our perspective a more active EU policy is needed in order to achieve the targets on cross-border student and workers mobility and the transferability of qualifications, which the EU has set itself on a number of occasions. For this reason it is crucial that current reform initiatives which seek to achieve greater mobility, such as the Erasmus for All programme, realise their maximum potential in strict connection with the broader European strategies for lifelong learning, and are made a political and financial priority for EU action.

While the European Commission has set up priorities in education in line with the Country Specific Recommendations of the Annual Growth Survey 2012, we fail to see any reference to the Employment Package, the European Commission Communication on Towards a job-rich recovery (April, 2012), which stresses the role of the social partners, particularly in the education and training sectors.

Maintaining and improving the quality of education and enhancing lifelong learning require sustainable public funding. Therefore, Member States should refrain from making public spending cuts, which affect the provision of high quality education and training. Thus, the ETUC supports the view of the European Commission on the need for further investment in education and training in order to achieve long-term beneficial effects through education on employment and on the labour market. The ETUC welcomes the fact that the Communication acknowledges that most Member States have made budget cuts in education and that the Commission encourages Member States to maintain investment in education despite the crisis. The parts of the European budget, notably the structural funds that are allocated for education and training support, should be increased and strengthened.

The ETUC rejects the Commission's view on cost-sharing as a way of funding education is not accepted by the ETUC. It is suggested in the Communication that

Member States should involve companies to a greater extent in the funding of education, especially in VET and higher education. While the ETUC supports the involvement of companies in providing trainee and apprenticeships for students and lifelong learning for workers, as well as work-based learning, it opposes any kind of privatisation of the initial VET-system. Public funding for education must be maintained and the European Commission should suggest to the Member States that they make better use of the European Structural Funds and strengthen the social partners' involvement in education and training.

The Communication continues to push for the increasing use of tuition fees for students in higher education. The ETUC opposes this policy, as higher education is not a tradable commodity. High quality, equity and improved access to higher education should be at the heart of European higher education policy rather than further privatisation and commodification, which would contribute to increasing social inequalities. Furthermore, we believe that high quality research should be maintained by means of high levels of public funding in order to serve the goals of education and training.

The ETUC considers that achieving economic growth through enhanced educational achievement depends on teachers. Therefore, the ETUC welcomes the Commission's initiative to make the teaching profession more attractive. However, the European Commission should clearly state and recommend to the Member States that the working conditions of teachers and trainers should be greatly improved. Governments' cuts to the education budgets and companies' cuts to the training budgets should stop so that the quality of teaching and training can be maintained and improved. One of the most essential means of maintaining quality of teaching is securing appropriate wages and quality initial and professional development training of the teachers. The ETUC is also of the view that Rethinking Education does not promote increased public funding for the improvement of recruitment, selection, induction and the professional development of teaching staff. Instead, the European Commission aims to achieve these goals via "coherent and adequately resourced systems". The systems should be sustainably and publicly financed.

The ETUC fails to see any concrete steps in the Commission's Communication towards establishing or taking into account partnerships with social partners, Partnerships with parents, students and other groups in society whose aim is protecting and developing education are also essential.

Finally, the Commission should limit the reference to OECD data in the Communication and not develop its education policy solely based on such data, as the OECD only represents 23 EU countries out of the 27 EU Member States. The countries that are missing from the OECD surveys are the ones that have the most problems with providing suitable conditions for teaching and quality education.