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(Notices)

NOTICES FROM EUROPEAN UNION INSTITUTIONS, BODIES, OFFICES AND AGENCIES

COUNCIL

Council conclusions on the role of education and training in the implementation of the 'Europe 2020' strategy

(2011/C 70/01)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

UNDERLINING its full readiness to put the Council's expertise on education and training policies at the service of the European Council and actively to contribute to the successful implementation of the 'Europe 2020' strategy for jobs and growth and the European Semester;

RECALLING the strategy's aims of achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, to be supported by a number of EU headline targets and a series of flagship initiatives;

AND IN THE LIGHT OF the Commission's 2011 Annual Growth Survey, including the Progress Report on 'Europe 2020', the Macro-Economic Report and the Draft Joint Employment Report, and of the 'Europe 2020' Integrated Guidelines;

EMPHASISES THAT:

Education and training have a fundamental role to play in achieving the 'Europe 2020' objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, notably by equipping citizens with the skills and competences which the European economy and European society need in order to remain competitive and innovative, but also by helping to promote social cohesion and inclusion. The key role of education and training should therefore be fully reflected in the Council's work during the new 'European Semester' established from the beginning of 2011. In particular, and with the support of the Commission, the Council should ensure that issues such as policy measures and reforms in the field of education and training, their contribution to the European targets and the exchange of good policy and practice are fully addressed.

CONSIDERS THAT:

1. The 'ET 2020' framework and its four strategic objectives⁽¹⁾ constitute a solid foundation for European cooperation in

the field of education and training, and can thus make a significant contribution towards achieving the 'Europe 2020' objectives.

2. The Copenhagen process, whose strategic priorities for the next decade were reviewed at a ministerial meeting in Bruges in December 2010⁽²⁾, emphasises that vocational education and training (VET) has a key role to play in supporting the aims of the 'Europe 2020' strategy by providing relevant, high quality skills and competences.
3. Two of the proposed 'Europe 2020' flagship initiatives are of special relevance to education and training:
 - (i) Firstly, the 'Youth on the Move' initiative, which aims to help young people to achieve their full potential in training and education and thereby improve their employment prospects. There is an urgent need to ensure that the number of young people dropping out of school is reduced, that all young people acquire the basic skills needed for further learning and that there are more opportunities to learn later in life. Higher education institutions should be encouraged to improve the quality and relevance of the courses they offer, so as to encourage a wider range of citizens to enrol in higher education, while learning mobility for all young people should be promoted throughout the education system, as well as in non-formal contexts such as youth work and participation. In addition, more workplace and entrepreneurial learning experiences should be encouraged, and opportunities for voluntary activities, self-employment and working and learning abroad expanded.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009.

⁽²⁾ Bruges, Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in VET: http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf

- (ii) Secondly, the 'Agenda for new skills and jobs' initiative, which highlights the need to upgrade skills and to boost employability. Progress has to be made to improve the identification of training needs, increase the labour market relevance of education and training, facilitate individuals' access to lifelong learning opportunities and guidance, and ensure smooth transitions between the worlds of education, training and employment. Achieving this calls for closer collaboration and partnerships between public services, education and training providers and employers at national, regional and local level. The transition towards learning outcome-based qualification systems and greater validation of skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal contexts are also of great importance in enhancing employability.
4. Education and training also have a substantial contribution to make in the other flagship initiatives, such as the 'Digital Agenda and Innovation Union'. Europe's education and training systems need to provide the right mix of skills and competences, to ensure a sufficient supply of science, maths and engineering graduates, to equip people with basic skills and the motivation and capacity to learn, to foster the development of transversal competences, including those that enable the use of modern digital technologies, to promote sustainable development and active citizenship, and to encourage creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.
 5. In response to the aims of the 'European Platform against Poverty' initiative, greater efforts are also required to provide support and open up opportunities for non-traditional and disadvantaged learners. Factors such as better access to high quality early childhood education and care, the provision of innovative education and training opportunities for disadvantaged groups are important for reducing social inequalities and enabling all citizens to realise their full potential.
3. Addressing as a matter of urgency the situation of young women and young men who face exceptional difficulties in entering the labour market due to the severity of the crisis.
 4. Improving the responsiveness of education and training systems to new demands and trends, in order to better meet the skills needs of the labour market and the social and cultural challenges of a globalised world.

II. Increased efforts will be required in order to achieve the headline targets in education

5. Achieving the two EU headline targets in education and training — i.e. reducing the share of early school leavers to less than 10 %, and increasing the proportion of 30-34 year olds having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40 % — will have a positive effect on jobs and growth. Moreover, measures taken in the education and training sector will contribute to achieving the targets in other areas, such as increasing employment rates, promoting research and development, and reducing poverty.
6. As regards the first of the two targets, early school leaving is a complex phenomenon influenced by educational, individual and socio-economic factors. Tackling the problem calls for preventive and compensatory measures, such as 'second chance' education, as well as close coordination between education and training sectors and with other related policy areas. Policy measures which can make a difference may include better early childhood education, updated curricula, improved teacher education, innovative teaching methods, individualised support — particularly for disadvantaged groups, including migrants and Roma — and stronger cooperation with families and the local community.
7. The second target also calls for a multi-faceted approach. In order to be attractive and efficient, tertiary or equivalent education systems require a high level of efficient investment, modernised curricula and improved governance. Innovation should be promoted at both the systemic and institutional level, while more effective use needs to be made of funding, and more varied sources of funding need to be found. Incentives are also required to establish better links with the wider world, through partnerships with businesses and research, and to open up to non-traditional learners, by providing adequate incentives and by promoting validation, support schemes and guidance services.

STRESSES THAT:

I. Education and training are key to achieving the 'Europe 2020' goals

1. Investing efficiently in high quality, modernised and reformed education and training is urgent because it will both lay the foundations for Europe's long-term prosperity and also, by providing people with more and better skills and competences, help to respond in the short-term to the effects of the crisis.
2. Strengthening lifelong learning opportunities for all and at every level of education and training is essential, notably by improving the attractiveness and relevance of VET and by increasing the participation in, and the relevance of, adult learning.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, INSOFAR AS EDUCATION AND TRAINING-RELATED ISSUES ARE CONCERNED, TO:

1. Adopt National Reform Programmes (NRPs) which are targeted and action-based, and which will contribute to achieving the objectives of the 'Europe 2020' strategy, including the EU headline targets.

2. Take policy actions in line with national targets, taking account of the Member States' relative starting positions and national circumstances, and in accordance with national decision-making procedures.
3. Cooperate horizontally and closely with other relevant sectors involved in the 'Europe 2020' process at national level, in particular with employment ministries, but also with other stakeholders such as the social partners, when designing and reporting on the implementation of national employment policies in the light of Integrated Guidelines Nos 8 and 9 ⁽¹⁾.
4. Promote reinforced cooperation between higher education institutions, research institutes and enterprises with a view to strengthening the knowledge triangle as the basis for a more innovative and creative economy, in line with Integrated Guideline No 4 ⁽²⁾.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO:

1. Strengthen horizontal cooperation and the sharing of experience and good practice among the Member States on the implementation of NRPs, and include these aspects in future peer-learning activities, where appropriate.
2. Further promote opportunities for policy learning, particularly in the areas covered by the 'Europe 2020' Strategy, and make the open method of coordination (OMC) more relevant to Member States' needs and interests, by making more effective use of the outcomes of European cooperation, increasing transparency and supporting more focused collaboration.
3. Strengthen the links between the targets and objectives of 'Europe 2020', notably by reinforcing the evidence base in this field and by involving the education and training sectors more closely in identifying bottlenecks to growth and employment.

4. As outlined in the 'Agenda for New Skills and Jobs' initiative, strengthen the capacity to anticipate and match labour market and skills needs, as well as to deliver the right mix of skills, including transversal competences such as digital and entrepreneurial competences, and develop a comprehensive strategy for improving access to lifelong learning, in particular for disadvantaged groups.

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO:

1. Further strengthen — in full agreement with the Member States — links between the implementation arrangements for the 'ET 2020' strategic framework and those for the 'Europe 2020' Strategy, notably as regards work cycles, reporting and objective setting. Particular account should be taken of the headline targets and of appropriate measures taken under the 'Youth on the Move' and 'Agenda for New Skills and Jobs' initiatives, when proposing the mid-term priorities for the next cycle of 'ET 2020'.
2. Encourage 'ET 2020' joint progress reports to take due account of the 'Europe 2020' objectives, whilst acknowledging the distinct added value which those reports offer in providing a deeper insight into Member States' national education policies.
3. Provide a thorough analysis of the progress made towards the headline targets and the 'ET 2020' benchmarks, as the basis for an exchange of views in Council in the course of each European Semester.
4. Strengthen the visibility and transparency of measures taken in the context of the OMC, by ensuring effective operational coordination which involves the Member States and provides for the participation of the relevant stakeholders.
5. Provide analysis to support exchange within the OMC framework on the link between educational investment and policy approaches aimed at achieving the 'Europe 2020' targets.

⁽¹⁾ No 8: Developing a skilled workforce responding to labour market needs and promoting lifelong learning.

No 9: Improving the performance of education and training systems at all levels and increasing participation in tertiary or equivalent education.

⁽²⁾ No 4: Optimising support for R & D and innovation, strengthening the knowledge triangle and unleashing the potential of the digital economy.