



Questions and answers: new strategy for high quality, inclusive, future-oriented education

Brussels, 30 May 2017

Questions and answers

Today the European Commission presented two new communications. The first one (I) outlines ways of supporting Member States in providing high quality and inclusive school education, the second one (II) focuses on the modernisation of higher education in Europe. In both communications, the Commission makes proposals for EU-level actions to assist Member States in their reforms. The Commission has also adopted a proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates in order to encourage and support Member State authorities to improve the quality and availability of information on what graduates go on to do after leaving higher education or vocational training.

I – SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AND EXCELLENT TEACHING FOR A GREAT START IN LIFE

What is the EU's role as regards school education?

The European Union has the task of contributing to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their actions ([Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union](#) Article 165)

The EU can play a useful role in supporting Member States while fully respecting the principle of subsidiarity and the diversity of education systems at national and in some cases regional level.

What is this initiative about?

Achieving long-term economic growth, competitiveness and social fairness are top priorities for the European Union. Investing in young people has a vital part to play in this. Education is key in giving them the best possible start in life. Today all young people need a broad set of competences to find fulfilling jobs, to be engaged citizens and do well in life. High-quality education for all will help Europe achieve its economic and social objectives and fuel Member States' competitiveness and innovation.

In life-long learning, schools play a pivotal role, but action is needed to improve the quality and performance of school education. Three main challenges in terms of performance, equity and responsiveness can be identified:

- There are weaknesses in competence development at school education level.
- School education could play a stronger role in promoting social fairness.
- The pace of technological and digital change is having a profound effect on our economies and societies - schools need to respond better to this new reality.

The Commission outlines **three broad areas** in which action is needed and where European level support can help address the above challenges ensuring quality education for all learners:

- (1) **Developing better and more inclusive schools:** the objective is to help schools innovate and develop towards high quality and inclusive learning environments where all learners can gain the key competences they need. The focus will be on new models of school organisation, including the co-operation with local partners, the use of digital technologies to enhance learning and improving quality in early childhood education and care.
- (2) **Supporting teachers and school leaders:** the objective is to achieve excellent teaching and learning by ensuring teachers and school leaders are well-trained and receive the support and recognition they deserve. The focus will be on encouraging collaboration among education professionals, helping them adapt and innovate their practice and making careers in teaching and school leadership more attractive.
- (3) **Developing and re-focusing the governance of school education systems:** the objective is to make school education systems more effective, equitable and efficient. The focus will be on quality assurance and the adequate and efficient use of school resources.

In practical terms, what will the Commission actually do?

To complement actions taken by Member States, the Commission will, for example:

- Increase cooperation between schools by making school partnerships and pupil mobility under Erasmus+ more accessible and to enrich digital and intercultural learning by promoting participation in [eTwinning](#). This platform, the world's biggest teachers' network, offers staff (teachers, head teachers, librarians, etc.) and pupils opportunities to communicate, collaborate and work on projects together.
- Develop a [self-assessment tool on digital capacity](#) (SELFIE) so that schools in the EU can, on a voluntary basis and using a set of common criteria, evaluate their digital capacity and develop and improve the way they use technologies for digital age learning.
- Further support Member States in providing **high quality early childhood education and care** and step up efforts to help them learn from each other and identify what works best.
- Offer **policy guidance on the careers and professional development of teachers and school leaders** by reinforcing peer learning under Education and Training 2020 through a series of expert seminars and linking it to the European sectoral social dialogue in education;
- Develop **online communities and resources for school professionals**, including new eTwinning opportunities for student teachers, online networks for early career teachers and their mentors, online courses (including Massive Open Online Courses), exchange of best practice among providers of Initial Teacher Education and a Digital Competence Framework to support teachers' self-assessment and development;
- Building on existing cooperation, including on skills strategies and school resources, **set up a demand driven technical support arrangement in cooperation with the OECD** to help Member States who voluntarily seek assistance, to design and implement major school education reforms.

What are the next steps?

The Commission will discuss the proposed measures with the Council and start implementing the EU level actions in 2017 and 2018 as outlined in the [Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication](#). A high-level Education Summit hosted by the Commission, planned for early 2018, will also bring together Education Ministers and key stakeholders (such as teachers, learners and parents, researchers, business and social partners, and civil society) to reach political consensus on how to tackle inequality in education and better support disadvantaged groups. This will be a key opportunity to give a fresh impetus to the reform and modernisation of education policies and EU cooperation in education.

II - A RENEWED EU AGENDA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What role does the EU have in higher education?

To achieve this, the EU facilitates regular cooperation and the exchange of experiences and good practices between Member State authorities responsible for higher education (including through a dedicated [working group](#)) and provides funding to promote quality in higher education through its main education funding programme, [Erasmus+](#). In particular, Erasmus+ supports cooperation projects involving higher education institutions in different countries and provides grants for students and staff wishing to study, train or work abroad for a period of time.

What is the new agenda the Commission has adopted today?

The communication adopted today sets out the Commission's perspective on how higher education needs to adapt to a changing world and help shape the Europe of the future. The renewed agenda identifies **four main priority areas** for action and proposes specific activities at EU level to complement work by higher education institutions and Member States authorities:

1. Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development;
2. Building inclusive and connected higher education systems;
3. Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation;
4. Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

How did the Commission decide on these priorities?

In drawing up the renewed agenda, the Commission took into account a [wide-ranging public consultation](#) on the future of EU cooperation in higher education, completed in 2016. The full results of the consultation are presented in [the Staff Working Document](#) accompanying the Commission's overarching skills strategy - A New Skills Agenda for Europe – adopted in June 2016.

Since completion of the public consultation, these broad priorities have also been discussed with representatives of national authorities and stakeholders in different settings.

Why is a new EU agenda needed?

The Commission adopted its [Modernisation agenda for higher education](#) in 2011. The ideas and objectives set out therein have fed into national policy-making, provided focus for EU cooperation in higher education and informed the design of the current generation of EU funding programmes, including Erasmus+.

However, higher education and the world in which it operates are changing rapidly. Technology is fundamentally changing the world of work in which tomorrow's graduates will find themselves. It is also offering new opportunities for organising teaching and learning. The development of knowledge-based industries and growing higher education sectors in emerging countries such as China and India mean increased competition and call on Europe to be more innovative than ever. And, in a Europe where societies are becoming more polarised and science is increasingly challenged, higher education has to play its part in restoring trust in democratic life, institutions and the role of independent research.

All these broad challenges call for responses from higher education. The renewed EU agenda pinpoints promising approaches and sets out how the EU will support higher education institutions and Member States to respond.

In practical terms, what will the Commission actually do?

Under each of the four main priority areas, the Commission sets out specific actions it will take to support the achievement of the overall goals.

The actions are set out in the Communication and focus on:

- **Improving evidence** on how higher education systems are performing and on policies and practices that work. Here, one example is the proposal to work with Member States to improve information on what former students go on to do after university through better graduate tracking.
- **Supporting cooperation and mutual learning between governments**, for instance through the proposed reviews of funding and incentive structures in higher education systems and 'peer counselling' in the area of funding.
- **Supporting cooperation between higher education institutions** to promote effective teaching, innovation activities and institutional management. These actions will be delivered through Erasmus+ cooperation projects, such as Strategic Partnerships.
- Creating more and better opportunities for **individuals to improve their skills through study, training and work abroad**. The renewed agenda includes actions that will create more work placements for students as well as enhance the opportunities for teaching staff to develop their pedagogical skills abroad.

Why is the Commission proposing a specific initiative on graduate tracking?

Along with the renewed agenda on higher education, the Commission has also adopted a proposal for a Council Recommendation on tracking graduates. The objective of this Recommendation is to encourage and support Member State authorities to improve the quality and availability of information on what graduates go on to do after leaving higher education or vocational education and training.

Information on the jobs graduates do, the length of time it took them to find work, the skills they use and the skills they need is crucially important for prospective students who are deciding what to study, as well as for teachers developing and delivering education and training programmes and policy-makers steering education and training systems. The draft Recommendation calls on Member States to develop national tracking systems, using administrative data and graduate surveys and to cooperate to make data from different EU countries easier to compare.

Do graduates have the right skills?

There is no systematic testing of graduates either from university or vocational programmes that would make it possible to compare what they know or can do. Overall, tertiary graduates are more likely to be employed and earn more than those with lower levels of educational attainment. Furthermore, those with vocational diplomas at the upper-secondary level are also relatively likely to be employed. The likelihood is often at a comparable level or just slightly below to that of tertiary graduates; and substantially higher than of those with upper-secondary diplomas with a general orientation or those without an upper-secondary qualification.

However, [analysis of vacancies across the EU](#) has revealed skills shortages in many countries in high-skilled occupations including ICT, science, technology, engineering and maths, medicine, nursing and teaching. Nevertheless, the picture varies significantly from region to region. At the same time, surveys of employers and students^[1] reveal concerns about the match between what students learn and the skills they need for work and life. The development of technology and changes in the profile of many

occupations are likely to increase further the need for many transversal skills like critical thinking, problem-solving and communication.

What can be done to enhance skills development in higher education?

Good course design, learning environments and teaching are all important for effective skills acquisition in higher education. While there are no one-size-fits-all approaches to any of these areas, the renewed EU agenda stresses the importance of focusing consistently on what students will learn (the learning outcomes that will be achieved), drawing as much as possible on real-world situations and problems, encouraging critical assessment and thinking in individual and group work and embedding work-based learning and mobility opportunities into curricula. The agenda proposes EU-level actions to:

- Support teaching staff develop their teaching skills through training periods abroad;
- Develop and test innovative curriculum design; and
- Allow more students to benefit from work placements abroad.

What can be done to help higher education contribute more to innovation?

Innovation is a term used to refer to the development of new products, services and processes in commercial businesses, public service organisations and the non-profit sector. A new commercial product, a new medical technique or a new approach to consulting citizens on urban development proposals are all forms of innovation.

Skilled, creative people, knowledge and new ideas are all important factors in innovation and are all resources found in abundance in higher education institutions. However, translating ideas and enthusiasm into innovation is not straightforward or predictable. This is why innovation policy involving universities increasingly focuses on creating environments that foster creativity and innovation. This includes encouraging students, researchers and staff to be creative and entrepreneurial, promoting cooperation between different disciplines and creating networks of people working inside and outside higher education.

See also [IP/17/1401](#)

[1] See results of [public consultation](#)

MEMO/17/1402

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