



COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION



## **Council Conclusions on investing in education and training - a response to Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes and the 2013 Annual Growth Survey**

*3221st EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE and SPORT Council meeting  
Brussels, 15 February 2013*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

IN THE CONTEXT OF

1. Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.
2. The Europe 2020 strategy, and in particular the 2012 and 2013 Annual Growth Surveys and the 2012 country-specific recommendations.
3. The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 establishing a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the period up to 2020 ("ET2020")<sup>1</sup>, the primary goal of which is to support the further development of education and training systems in the Member States aimed at ensuring the personal, social and professional fulfilment of all citizens, as well as sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, creativity and innovation, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 119, 28.05.2009, pp. 2-10.

# **P R E S S**

4. The February 2012 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the "ET2020" strategic framework<sup>2</sup>, which set out steps to mobilise the "ET2020" process in support of the Europe 2020 objectives on growth and jobs, and identified a number of priority areas for European cooperation in education and training for the period 2012-2014.
5. A sustained economic crisis highlighted by the latest Commission forecasts, predicting a slower than expected economic recovery and a peak in unemployment of almost 11% in 2013<sup>3</sup>, with 60 % higher unemployment levels for low-skilled workers.<sup>4</sup>
6. The need to stem the rise in youth unemployment in Europe, now at an average rate of almost 23 % and increasing to over 50 % in several Member States.<sup>5</sup>
7. Growing evidence that skills supply is not meeting the needs of the labour market, with over two million vacancies across Europe currently unfilled.<sup>6</sup>
8. The need to lay the foundations for future growth and competitiveness in a context of tight public finances through more efficient investments in education and training systems, and the undeniable social and economic returns of such investments.
9. The Council conclusions of 26 November 2012 on Education and training in Europe 2020 – the contribution of education and training to economic recovery, growth and jobs<sup>7</sup>, which agreed that the education and training sector, including ministerial level, should play a more prominent role both in defining common approaches and objectives relating to education and training, as well as in implementing the education and training aspects of the European Semester of Europe 2020.
10. The conclusions of the European Council of 13/14 December 2012<sup>8</sup>, which:
  - called on the Council, the Member States and the Commission to ensure rapid follow-up to the Commission communication on *Rethinking Education*<sup>9</sup>,
  - welcomed the progress made towards a comprehensive EU approach to youth employment and called on the Council to give consideration to the proposals of the Youth Employment Package,
  - stressed the importance to pursue differentiated, growth-friendly and sound fiscal policies and to balance productive public investment needs with fiscal discipline objectives.

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<sup>2</sup> OJ C 70, 8.3.2012, pp. 9-18.

<sup>3</sup> Autumn Economic Forecast of the European Commission (November 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat Unemployment Statistics (November 2012).

<sup>5</sup> "Moving Youth into Employment" - COM(2012) 727 final, 5 December 2012.

<sup>6</sup> European Vacancy Monitor, 7 December 2012.

<sup>7</sup> OJ C 393, 19.12.2012, pp. 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> EUCO 205/12.

<sup>9</sup> 14871/12 + ADD 1 - 8.

11. The establishment, subject to ongoing negotiations on a Multi-Annual Financial Framework 2014-2020, of a link between the choice of investment priorities and interventions for the future Structural Funds programming 2014-2020 and the policy challenges highlighted in the country-specific recommendations and Member States' National Reform Programmes.

#### WELCOMES

1. The central role assigned to education and training as a key driver for growth and competitiveness in the Annual Growth Survey 2013, including the reference to the key role of investments in human capital for tackling and preventing unemployment and preparing a job-rich recovery.
2. The 2013 Annual Growth Survey's stance on differentiated fiscal consolidation, calling on Member States to preserve future growth potential by giving priority to, and where possible, strengthening investments in education and training.
3. The call of the 2013 Annual Growth Survey for reforms to raise the performance of education and training systems and overall skills levels, linking the worlds of work and education more closely together, while acknowledging that there is no "one-size-fits-all" agenda and that some reforms may take a significant amount of time to show effects.
4. The importance attached to skills, education, training and lifelong learning in enhancing employability and, in particular, tackling and preventing youth unemployment by addressing its root causes, many of which are examined in the recent communication of 20 November 2012 from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*.

#### INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, WITH DUE REGARD FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY, TO

1. Ensure that the social aspects of education and training are sustained and that equal opportunities for access to quality education are provided, so that education and training systems can continue to contribute to fostering social cohesion, sustainable development, active citizenship and personal fulfilment in European societies.
2. Strengthen the role of education and training in the Europe 2020 Strategy, taking into consideration the *Rethinking Education* communication as well as the education and training aspects of the Annual Growth Surveys and the country-specific recommendations (CSRs), and focusing - in accordance with national and "ET2020" priorities and on the basis of available resources - on the following areas:

- a. raising the performance of education and training systems, and overall skill and competence levels, for instance by linking the worlds of work and education more closely, and by ensuring effective communication and strong partnerships between the relevant policy areas, education and training sub-sectors, the social partners, and different levels of governance;
- b. promoting excellence in vocational education and training in cooperation with the social partners, for instance by developing quality-assured VET systems with a strong work-based learning component, by considering the development of short-cycle post-secondary or tertiary qualifications, in accordance with the EQF or linked to the first cycle in the context of the Bologna Process, and focused on potential growth areas or areas with skills shortages, and by aligning VET policies with national, regional or local economic development strategies;
- c. improving the performance of young people at high risk of early school leaving and with low basic skills in line with the framework laid down in the 2011 Council Recommendation<sup>10</sup>, for instance through the early identification of low achievers in basic skills across all phases of schooling, by providing individualised support - while validating the knowledge, skills and competences acquired in non-formal and informal settings - and by combating the causes of low achievement with the help of high quality and accessible early childhood education and care;
- d. reducing the number of low-skilled adults, for instance by increasing incentives for adult training, by providing information on access to lifelong learning services, such as information on the validation of non-formal and informal learning<sup>11</sup> and career guidance, and by offering tailored learning opportunities to individual learners;
- e. introducing measures to develop transversal skills and competences as described in the 2006 Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning<sup>12</sup>, from early stages of education up to higher education, using innovative and student-centred pedagogical approaches;

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<sup>10</sup> Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving [OJ C 191, 1.7.2011, pp. 1-6].

<sup>11</sup> in accordance with the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning [OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1-5].

<sup>12</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning [OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, pp. 10-18].

- f. revising and strengthening the professional profile of the teaching profession (including teachers, school leaders and teacher educators), in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, for instance by ensuring effective initial teacher education and by providing coherent and adequately resourced systems for recruitment, selection, initial teacher education, early career support and competence-based continuing professional development of teaching staff;
- g. optimising ICT-supported learning and access to high quality Open Educational Resources (OERs), for instance by supporting ICT-based teaching and assessment practices, by promoting the transparency of rights and obligations of users and producers of digitised content, and by supporting education and training institutions in adapting to the emergence of OERs, with particular regard to quality assurance and monitoring;
- h. prioritising, and where possible strengthening, investments in education and training, while working to enhance the efficiency of such expenditure and stimulating national debates on sustainable and balanced funding mechanisms, involving a broad range of stakeholders.

#### AGREES THAT

With a view to playing a more prominent role in the implementation of the European Semester, Member States' representatives meeting within the EYCS Council - and/or where appropriate, the relevant preparatory bodies - should consider, with the agreement of the Member States concerned, the progress made by Member States in responding to challenges identified in country-specific recommendations (CSRs) in the field of education and training. Furthermore, and in line with the 'roadmap' for the European Semester prepared by the Presidency, relevant Committees such as EMCO may be supported as appropriate by the Education Committee with regard to the examination of draft CSRs in the area of education and training.

#### NOTES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO

- 1. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity and national responsibility for education and training, as well as the institutional autonomy of education providers, support Member States in their efforts to improve their education and training systems, making full use of EU programmes and funds in the field of education and training, and by means of an improved evidence base, a detailed cost-benefit analysis and increased transparency, including by:
  - a. stepping-up its country-specific and country-supportive expertise and its analytical capacity;

- b. having structured contacts with Member States, including bilateral meetings at key moments in the preparatory phase leading up to the Commission's adoption of draft CSRs;
  - c. ensuring stronger co-ordination of the activities carried out by the OMC<sup>13</sup> working groups established under the "ET2020" framework and that all such groups focus on the key policy challenges identified through the "ET 2020", Europe 2020 and European Semester processes;
  - d. examining the feasibility of supporting Member States, when requested, in inviting peers to an in-depth discussion of specific issues in their country, using relevant financial instruments, including by supporting the participation of internationally renowned experts;
  - e. in cooperation with the Member States, examining feedback on the operation of the first iteration of the new Education and Training Monitor and the Education and Training Forum, and making proposals to ensure added value from the application of these new tools in the European Semester;
  - f. in cooperation with the Member States, considering further methodological work in relation to the collection of relevant data in order to support the proposal made<sup>14</sup> for a possible benchmark to be adopted by the Council in the area of language competences.
2. Support initiatives - such as the proposed EU-level Alliance for Apprenticeships - aimed at improving work-based learning and involving strong partnerships between education and employment, in particular social partners, business and VET providers, in line with the Copenhagen Process.
  3. Explore with social partners at EU-level options for increasing the level and quality of education and training provision for adults with a view to re-skilling and up-skilling the workforce.
  4. In close cooperation with Member States and relevant stakeholders, assess the impact of the potential creation of a European Area for Skills and Qualifications to promote stronger convergence between different EU and national transparency and recognition tools, so as to ensure that skills and qualifications can be easily recognised across borders.
  5. In coordination with any initiatives by the Member States in this area, launch a new initiative on "Opening up Education", analysing the impact of providing EU support to increase access to and use of quality-assured Open Educational Resources and ICT.

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<sup>13</sup> Open Method of Coordination.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. document 14871/12 ADD 2, p. 3.

6. Introduce actions promoting entrepreneurship education, in particular policy guidance, and a framework to encourage entrepreneurial education at institutional level.
7. Analyse the efficiency of public spending on education and training and initiate an EU-level debate with relevant stakeholders on the benefits of investments in different education and training sectors.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO

1. Establish a closer link between the key strategic policy challenges identified throughout the European Semester and OMC activities, and develop, when requested, the country-specific dimension to assist both individual and clusters of Member States in following up on country-specific recommendations (CSRs).
2. Fully tap into the potential of cooperation and peer learning established within the OMC through improved working methods including, as appropriate:
  - a. A stronger complementarity of activities and avoidance of duplication by better exploiting the presence which EU Member States have in other international organisations, such as the OECD<sup>15</sup>, UNESCO and the Council of Europe;
  - b. Structures and procedures that increase the efficiency, effectiveness and Member States' ownership of the OMC process, for example at the levels of Directors-General and frontline senior policymakers;
  - c. A structured voluntary peer review process focusing on the implementation of the country-specific recommendations and building on the experience gained in the pilot peer review of September 2012;
  - d. Regular feedback from all working groups to the Education Committee and/or other relevant groups and the presentation of their key policy findings to Council in the form of a standard template;
  - e. Regular communication between the Education Committee, in particular, and all thematic working groups in order to ensure that working groups are fully briefed on the context in which they are operating and on any ongoing developments relevant to their remit;
  - f. Clear mandates and standard operating procedures (i.e. terms of reference, deliverables, membership requirements and sunset clauses) for all thematic working groups, including ensuring the potential of ICTs is exploited through, for example, the holding of virtual meetings;

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<sup>15</sup> The right of participation of all Members States in the work of this organisation should be ensured.

- g. Structured dissemination arrangements entailing both an EU and a Member State dimension, to be established prior to the publication of working group results, including multilingual publication of summary versions of working group outputs.
3. Stimulate a constructive process of follow-up of the country-specific recommendations by sharing, with the relevant policy committees (i.e Economic Policy Committee and Employment Committee) and on a regular basis, the results of the aforementioned OMC cooperation mechanisms."
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