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## EUNEC Statements on the European Commission Communication: 'Rethinking education: Investing in skills for socio-economic outcomes'.

### *EUNEC*

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EUNEC is the network of education councils in the European Union. EUNEC brings together the expertise of advisory bodies and of the stakeholders and experts who are involved in the national/regional advisory processes. These advisory bodies give advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

### *Context*

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On 20 November 2012 the European Commission has published an impressive set of policy recommendations that have to reinforce the cooperation between EU Member States and give a new impetus to education policy in the EU Member States. The publication contains evaluations as well as recommendations for policy.

The most important part of the proposal is the Communication 'Rethinking education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes'<sup>1</sup> The Commission takes the opportunity of the long expected Communication on skills to gather all aspects of European Education and Training policy in an encompassing framework and to give some new impetus. The European Commission wants to put Education and Training high on the agenda, in the EU and in the Member States.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, [Rethinking education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes](#), COM(2012)669/3, 20 November 2012.

The Communication is accompanied by seven annexes that contain important policy recommendations related to the main fields in European and national Education and Training policy.

- The 'Education and Training monitor'<sup>2</sup> presents a state of the art related to the current benchmarks and indicators.
- 'Rethinking education Country analysis'<sup>3</sup> offers for every Member State a report on their progress towards benchmarks and indicators.
- The staff working document on 'Language competences for employability, mobility and growth'<sup>4</sup> analyses the strengths and weaknesses of European language policy.
- The staff working document on 'Partnerships and flexible pathways for lifelong skills development'<sup>5</sup> pleads in favour of a stronger implication of social partners in education policy. Special attention is given to links between education and other settings for learning.
- The staff working document 'Assessment of Key Competences in initial Education and Training'<sup>6</sup> highlights the role of key competences in compulsory education. It presents a state of the art of the progress of Member States towards the reference framework for key competences that has been implemented by the EU during the past years. It insists on the importance of adequate ways of evaluation in order to work with key competences in a more coherent way.
- The staff working document on Vocational Education and Training<sup>7</sup> looks at the state of the art in the Copenhagen Process and stresses the importance of VET in tackling the economic recession and in innovating labour markets.
- The seventh document focuses on the shortage of teachers, the competences of teachers and the crucial role of school leaders.<sup>8</sup>

There is even more. In the policy documents that are issued by employment policy, the education policy of the Member States is in the picture. In the beginning of 2012, the European Commission launched a 'Youth Employment Package'<sup>9</sup>. It contains, next to other initiatives, an important number of proposals that are relevant for future education policy. In the accompanying document a strong focus is put on the link between 'Rethinking education' and the 'Youth Employment Package'. The main message of the proposals is that, in February 2013 (!), all Member States need to have a Youth Guarantee scheme, in order to offer to all young people a guarantee at the transition from

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, [Education and Training monitor 2012](#), SDW(2012)373/2

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, [Rethinking education Country analysis](#), SDW(2012)377.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, [Language competences for employability, mobility and growth](#), SDW(2012)372

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, [Partnerships and flexible pathways for lifelong skills development](#), SDW(2012)376

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, [Assessment of Key Competences in initial education and training: Policy Guidance](#), SWD(2012)371

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, [Vocational education and training for better skills, growth and jobs](#), SDW(2012)375

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, [Supporting the Teaching Profession for better Learning Outcomes](#), SDW(2012)374

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, [Moving Youth into Employment](#), SWD(2012)406final

education to employment.<sup>10</sup> Other important issues are qualitative traineeships and stimuli for apprenticeships, to be promoted by a 'EU Alliance for apprenticeships'.

This massive package of policy proposals is the result of the conviction of the European Commission that Education and Training are one of the important levers to respond to the economic crisis. On the one hand, the EU faces a youth unemployment of 23%, and, on the other hand, more than two million vacancies are not being filled in. Too many young people (13,5 % through the EU) leave school without formal qualifications, whilst the knowledge economy is asking for more and more competences.

Another contradiction is that, whilst everybody agrees that Education and Training have a big impact on economical and societal development, the budgets for Education and Training are under pressure of shortages in public funding. Several EU policy makers state that they want to put Education and Training on top of the policy agenda, and therefore also on top of the budgetary priorities.

## *Recommendations*

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### *General approach*

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EUNEC decided to react as soon as possible on the broad package of proposals issued by the European Commission on the societal role of education in the current economic crisis.

The proposals are not only broad from a content point of view. They also plead for a MORE strict follow-up and governance of the engagement of the Member States to implement common and national objectives. In order to realise this follow-up, more education benchmarks are linked to the European Semester.

The current statements are to be considered as a first reaction on behalf of EUNEC. As a next step, EUNEC intends to formulate statements on more specific themes that are part of this European Commission Communication.

To start with, EUNEC states that this package of proposals is a clear signal to governments and heads of states of the importance of investing in the talents of young people and adults. These talents offer a solid basis for sustainable societal development and economic well-fare. The European Commission supports the idea that Education and Training have to be considered as a sector in which governments have to invest permanently. For EUNEC, Education and Training remain a public responsibility, for which a public budget has to be available. Therefore, one should be careful when considering input of own means of learners and commercial initiatives for Education and Training.

EUNEC is pleading for a broad approach of education policy. Sustainability, social cohesion, equal opportunities and a development oriented approach are as important as the labour market orientation. EUNEC cannot support an approach to Education and Training that is exclusively labour

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission, [Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Establishing a Youth Guarantee](#), SDW(2012), 409final

market oriented. In this sense, EUNEC disagrees with the title of the Communication 'Rethinking education'. As the Communication mainly deals with labour market issues and with skills preparing for the labour market, the subtitle 'Investing in skills for socio-economic outcomes' seems to cover better the content.

In the field of governance mechanisms, EUNEC is pleading for an approach of education policy from a subsidiarity point of view. Decisions on Education and Training have to be taken at the appropriate level. This means that, in the European framework for cooperation, the Member States/regions have the major responsibility for the implementation of the education policy and the translation of the European frameworks into the national/regional education tradition.

EUNEC is concerned about the fact that the European texts pay only little attention to the role that school communities and school groups play in education policy. In every debate on effectiveness of education policy, the local level has to be taken into account and valued.

EUNEC is also concerned about the fact that, at European level and at national level, decision lines are not transparent enough. In the multitude of projects, there is a clear need to make transparent choices and to decide on priorities.

In the European thinking on education innovation, there is too little attention for implementation processes, at the level of the Member States as well as at the level of the schools.

### *Importance of continuous focus on social cohesion, sustainability and equal opportunities within a pedagogical perspective*

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EUNEC has noticed that, in recent years, the perspective of European education policy has broadened. As it has been the case in the wider Lisbon process, the attention for social cohesion and sustainability has been taken on board. However, in this new Communication the European Commission stresses the role of Education and Training in tackling the economic crisis in the European Member States. EUNEC has the impression that the broader vision on education in the EU has again been narrowed.

EUNEC welcomes the fact that this Communication stresses the important role of Education and Training in the economic development of the Member States, because this urges the Member States to invest permanently in Education and Training and gives new impetus to Education and Training policy. But this cannot lead to a lack of attention to social cohesion and sustainability. EUNEC also stresses the fact that Education and Training alone cannot offer a way out of the crisis; raising skills will not be sufficient to reduce unemployment.

It is also important to continue to consider Education and Training as a public responsibility. EUNEC states that Education and Training have to be financed by public budgets. This is the only way to guarantee equal opportunities and sustainability.

EUNEC also stresses the role of education in the development of the personality, and the perspective of the learner. Education takes place in a societal context, and has to be able to react to the societal expectations in a critical way. Education and Training have to fulfill this task taking into account their pedagogical mission. Education guides (young) people in their lifelong development, in society as

well as in their personal life. Education teaches the learners to question critically the societal developments and to deal with it in an innovative way. Education teaches learners how to handle consciously values and norms, diversity and sense-giving. For all these reasons, Education and Training need to be able to maintain an assertive autonomy vis-à-vis the multitude of societal expectations and translate them into its own mission and dynamism.<sup>11</sup>

In order to look for answers to important societal changes, education is part of a global system of diverse actors, such as social partners, stakeholders in care and wellbeing. In this system, every actor has to take his own responsibility. That's why EUNEC appreciates the fact that the European Commission Communication pleads in favour of partnerships between education and societal sectors, although we think that the Communication puts too much emphasis on socio-economic actors; there is too little attention for other relevant policy domains.

The emphasis on economical and societal expectations should never threaten the perspective of the young or adult learner. The perspective of the learner has to remain the starting point of education policy. EUNEC regrets that, in this Communication, issues such as participation of the learner, his wellbeing, motivation and engagement are not enough present.

### *Partnerships*

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EUNEC appreciates the emphasis that is put on partnerships. It is important to see these partnerships in a broad way, including all relevant actors: social partners as well as partners from well-fare and socio-cultural actors.

On the other hand, EUNEC regrets that there is too little attention for education partners such as teachers, parents and, most of all, the perspective of the learners. EUNEC recommends to put emphasis on structural dialogue with society and with all the education stakeholders.

EUNEC regrets that this chapter does not refer to the added value of education councils and structured dialogue with stakeholders.<sup>12</sup>

### *Vocational Education and Training*

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The Commission clearly questions the funding of VET. The Communication pleads in favour of more input of private budgets and of a link with fiscal policy, mainly for lifelong learning in VET oriented sectors. EUNEC refers here to its recommendations on 'Erasmus for all'.<sup>13</sup>

An EU strategy for excellence in VET implies systematic cooperation on standards, high quality of didactical approach, measuring and comparing results of VET systems and of individual learners. EUNEC thinks that the European institutions have to clarify the coherence of initiatives in the framework of the Bruges process, the Youth Employment Package and Rethinking Education. It is not clear for the partners which is the baseline, and which institutions give impetus for the innovation of VET.

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<sup>11</sup> [EUNEC Statements on Bildung from a lifelong perspective](#), Budapest, 2011

<sup>12</sup> [Education councils in Europe. Balancing expertise, societal input and policy control](#). (Marleen Brans, Jan Van Damme and Jonathan Gaskell, 2010)

<sup>13</sup> [EUNEC Recommendations on 'Erasmus for all'](#), 2011

*Competences of teachers and the attractiveness of the teaching profession (including school leaders).<sup>14</sup>*

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EUNEC draws the attention to the fact that, for the first time, the HRM policy in education is part of European education policy. The focus on school leaders is completely new. Before, there was a general reference framework on competences and professionalisation of teachers, but the policy concerning teachers was not the object of any benchmarking or reporting from the Member States. The country-specific recommendations in the field of education staff policy are new.

Member States have to be aware of the fact that interferences between these European frameworks and national/regional debates are possible.

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<sup>14</sup> [EUNEC Statements on 'The teaching profession. Changes, challenges and perspectives'](#) ( Vilnius, 2008)