Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training

3013th EDUCATION, YOUTH AND CULTURE Council meeting
Brussels, 11 May 2010

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

HAVING REGARD TO

1. The conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States of 14 November 2006, meeting within the Council, on efficiency and equity in education and training[1], which invited Member States to ensure equitable education and training systems that are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage.

2. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning[2], which highlights the importance of developing the provision of key competences for all and of making appropriate provision for those who due to educational disadvantages need particular support to fulfil their educational potential.

3. The Council Resolution of 15 November 2007 on new skills for new jobs[3], which stressed the need to anticipate skill needs and raise overall skill levels, giving priority to the education and training of those with low skills and at the risk of economic and social exclusion.

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[1]   OJ C 298, 8.12.2006, p.3.
[2]   OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p.10.
[3]   OJ C 290, 4.12.2007, p.1.

P R E S S

4.   The Council Resolution of 23 November 2007 on modernising universities for Europe's competitiveness in a global knowledge economy[4], which reaffirmed the importance of increasing lifelong learning opportunities, broadening higher education access to include non-traditional and adult learners and developing the lifelong learning dimension of universities.

5.   The Council conclusions of 22 May 2008 on adult learning[5], which emphasised the need to raise skill levels of a still significant number of low-skilled workers and which underlined the contribution of adult learning to fostering social cohesion and economic development.

6.   Decision No 1098/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2008 on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010)[6], which states that the lack of basic competences and qualifications adapted to the needs of the labour market is a major barrier to inclusion in society.

7.   The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 21 November 2008 on the future priorities for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET)[7], which underlined that VET not only promotes competitiveness, business performance and innovation in the context of a globalised economy, but also equity, cohesion, personal development and active citizenship, and that its attractiveness should be promoted among all target groups.

8.   The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, of 21 November 2008 on preparing young people for the 21st century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools[8], which invited Member States to ensure access to high quality educational opportunities and services, particularly for children and young people who may be disadvantaged by personal, social, cultural and/or economic circumstances.

9.   The Council conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the education of children with a migrant background[9], which invited Member States to take appropriate measures at their required level of responsibility - local, regional or national - with a view to ensuring that all children are offered fair and equal opportunities, as well as the necessary support to develop their full potential, irrespective of background.

10.   The Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018)[10], which invited Member States to ensure equal access for young people to high quality education and training at all levels, and to promote better links between formal education and non-formal learning,

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[4]   Doc. 16096/1/07 REV 1.
[5]   OJ C 140, 6.6.2008, p.10.
[6]   OJ L 298, 7.11.2008, p.20.
[7]   OJ C 18, 24.1.2009, p.6.
[8]   OJ C 319, 13.12.2008, p. 20.
[9]   OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p.5.
[10]   OJ C 311, 19.12.2009, p.1.

AND HAVING PARTICULAR REGARD TO

The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020")[11], which identified the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship as one of its four strategic objectives and which defined five reference levels of European average performance ("European benchmarks") that also place a strong emphasis on achieving equity.

AND IN THE LIGHT OF

The conference on *Inclusive Education: a way to promote social cohesion* held in Madrid on 11-12 March 2010.

NOTING THAT

Education and training systems across the EU need to ensure both equity and excellence. Improving educational attainment and providing key competences for all are crucial not only to economic growth and competitiveness, but also to reducing poverty and fostering social inclusion.

Social inclusion through education and training should ensure equal opportunities for access to quality education, as well as equity in treatment, including by adapting provision to individuals' needs. At the same time, it should ensure equal opportunities to achieve the best outcomes, by seeking to provide the highest level of key competences for all.

AWARE THAT

Education and training systems contribute significantly to fostering social cohesion, active citizenship and personal fulfilment in European societies. They have the potential to promote upward social mobility and to break the cycle of poverty, social disadvantage and exclusion. Their role could be further enhanced by adapting them to the diversity of citizens' backgrounds in terms of cultural richness, existing knowledge and competences, and learning needs.

Education is neither the sole cause of, nor the sole solution to, social exclusion. Educational measures alone are unlikely to alleviate the impact of multiple disadvantages, and so multi-sectoral approaches are needed which can articulate such measures with wider social and economic policies.

Increasing international competitiveness requires high professional skills combined with an ability to create, innovate and work in multicultural and multilingual environments. Together with the demographic squeeze, this makes it even more important for education and training systems to raise overall attainment levels, whilst ensuring that all people, young and adult - regardless of their socio-economic background or personal circumstances - are enabled to develop their full potential through lifelong learning. In this respect, particular attention should be paid to the requirements of persons with special educational needs, those of persons with a migrant background and those of the Roma community.

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[11]   OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p.2.

As the social effects of the economic crisis continue to unfold - and in the context of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010)[12] - it is clear that the downturn has hit hard the most disadvantaged, while at the same time jeopardising budgetary efforts which target these groups.

RECOGNISES THAT

If Europe is to compete and prosper as a knowledge-based economy based on sustainable, high levels of employment and reinforced social cohesion - as envisaged in the *Europe 2020* strategy, the role of education and training in a lifelong learning perspective is crucial. The provision of key competences for all on a lifelong learning basis will play a crucial role in improving citizens' employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment.

In the context of the European benchmarks agreed under the ET 2020 Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training, there is an urgent need to reduce the current number of low achievers in basic skills – particularly reading (for which current data indicate that an average of one in four pupils is unable to read and write properly) - and to further reduce the number of early leavers from education and training, as well as a need to increase participation in early childhood education and care, to raise the number of young people with a tertiary-level qualification, and to increase adult participation in lifelong learning. Such needs are particularly acute in the case of those from a disadvantaged background, who statistically tend to perform significantly less well against each of the benchmarks. Only by addressing the needs of those at risk of social exclusion can the objectives of the Strategic Framework be properly met.

CONSIDERS THAT

Differences in the degree of social inclusion achieved by the Member States indicate that there remains significant scope to reduce inequalities and exclusion in the EU, both through structural changes and through additional support for learners at risk of social exclusion. Equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive but complementary, and should be pursued at both national and European level. While each Member State's situation is different, European cooperation can help identify ways to promote social inclusion and equity, while not compromising excellence.

Systems which uphold high standards of quality for all and strengthen accountability, which foster personalised, inclusive approaches, which support early intervention and which target disadvantaged learners in particular, can be powerful drivers in fostering social inclusion. Student support schemes such as grants, loans and additional non-pecuniary benefits can play an important role in facilitating equal access, particularly in higher education. Given increased pressure on financial resources for education, it will be crucial to achieve enhanced effectiveness for public investment; analysis of the design and impact of different funding systems can help to inform choices.

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[12]   OJ L 298, 7.11.2008, p.20.

FURTHER CONSIDERS THAT

With regard to early and school education:

1. Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care, with highly skilled staff and adequate child-to-staff ratios, produces positive results for all children and has highest benefits for the most disadvantaged. Providing adequate incentives and support, adapting provision to needs and increasing accessibility can broaden the participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds[13].

2. Ensuring high-quality education which provides key competences for all is one of the most effective ways of promoting social inclusion. Additional support is needed for schools with a high proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. The successful prevention of early school leaving requires the development of knowledge about groups at risk of dropping out (e.g. due to personal or socio-economic circumstances, or due to learning difficulties) at local, regional and national level, and systems for identifying early individuals who are at such risk. Comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategies should be implemented, which provide a range of school-wide and systemic policies targeting the different factors leading to early school leaving. Individualised support for pupils at risk can include the provision of personalised learning, counselling, mentorship and tutorship systems, welfare support and extracurricular activities in support of learning.

4. At the level of each education institution, strategies for inclusion require strong leadership, the systematic monitoring of results and quality, innovative high quality teaching supported by appropriate teacher training, empowerment and motivation, cooperation with other professionals and the provision of adequate resources. Providing more integrated support to learners in need requires cooperation with parents and stakeholders in the community, for instance in areas such as non-formal and informal learning activities outside school hours.

5. Creating the conditions required for the successful inclusion of pupils with special needs in mainstream settings benefits all learners. Increasing the use of personalised approaches, including individualised learning plans and harnessing assessment to support the learning process, providing teachers with skills to manage and benefit from diversity, promoting the use of co-operative teaching and learning, and widening access and participation, are ways of increasing quality for all.

With regard to vocational education and training (VET):

• A diverse vocational offer, with a stronger emphasis on key competences, including transversal ones, can provide much needed routes for individuals to improve their qualifications and thus access the labour market. In the case of disadvantaged groups, the relevance of VET can be increased by tailoring provision to individual needs, strengthening guidance and counselling, recognising different forms of prior learning, and promoting alternate schemes for learning at the workplace. Increasing participation, particularly that of the low-skilled, in continuing vocational education and training is key to an active inclusion approach and to limiting unemployment in cases of industrial change.

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[13] For the purposes of this text, the term "disadvantaged background" also covers, as appropriate, learners with special educational needs.

With regard to higher education:

1. Raising aspirations and increasing access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds requires strengthening financial support schemes and other incentives, and improving their design. Affordable, accessible, adequate and portable student loans as well as means-tested grants can successfully increase participation rates for those who cannot afford the costs of higher education.

2. More flexible and diversified learning paths - for example recognising prior learning, part-time education, and distance learning - can help to reconcile higher education with work or family commitments and to encourage wider participation. Implementing measures aimed at monitoring and increasing the retention rate in higher education, at providing individualised support, as well as at enhancing guidance, mentoring and skills training - particularly during the early stages of a university course - can improve graduation rates for disadvantaged learners.

3. Special efforts are needed, especially with regard to funding, to ensure that full account is taken of the needs of disadvantaged students, who are often unable to benefit from the mobility schemes available.

4. The fight against inequality, poverty and social exclusion can be strengthened by recognising that higher education institutions have a social responsibility in returning the benefits of knowledge to society, in putting knowledge at the service of the wider community - at both the local and the global level - and in responding to social needs.

5. Higher education institutions can also exercise social responsibility by making their resources available to adult and informal and non-formal learners, strengthening research on social exclusion, fostering innovation and updating educational resources and methodology.

With regard to adult education:

1. Expanding access to adult education can create new possibilities for active inclusion and enhanced social participation, especially for the low skilled, the unemployed, adults with special needs, the elderly, and migrants. With specific regard to the latter, learning the host country language or languages plays an important role in promoting social integration, as well as improving basic skills and employability.

2. Adult learning, offered in a variety of environments, involving multiple stakeholders (including public and private sectors, higher education institutions, local communities and NGOs) and covering learning for personal, civic, social and employment-related purposes, is central to reaching disadvantaged and at risk groups. With specific regard to employment-related learning, businesses can demonstrate corporate social responsibility by better anticipating structural changes and providing opportunities for retraining.

3. The potential of intergenerational learning can be explored as a means of sharing knowledge and expertise, and of encouraging communication and solidarity between younger and older generations, bridging the growing digital divide and reducing social isolation.

Within a lifelong learning perspective:

- Education and training systems with flexible pathways, which keep opportunities open as long as possible and which avoid "dead ends", help to overcome disadvantage. They also help to avoid socio-economic or cultural marginalisation and being held back by low expectations. Providing lifelong guidance and the validation of acquired skills, including the recognition of prior learning and experience, diversifying admission patterns for all levels of education and training, including higher education and adult learning, and devoting more attention to the quality and attractiveness of learning environments, can facilitate transitions for learners. Innovative ways of delivering guidance and collaboration with other social services and civil society are needed to reach out to disadvantaged groups outside the education and training systems.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES THE MEMBER STATES

With regard to early and school education, to

1. Ensure wider access to high quality early childhood education and care, in order to give all children - particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special education needs - a sure start, as well as to increase the motivation to learn.

2. Improve the quality of provision in schools and reduce differences between them and within them, with a view to countering possible socio-economic or cultural marginalisation.

3. Focus on the acquisition of essential basic skills, especially literacy, numeracy and – notably in the case of pupils with a migrant background – language skills.

4. Encourage networking activities between schools, in order to share experience and examples of good practice.

5. Intensify efforts to prevent early school leaving, based on the development of early warning systems identifying pupils at risk; encourage school-wide strategies for inclusion, focused on quality and supported by adequate leadership and teacher training in a lifelong learning perspective.

6. Develop more personalised approaches and systemic responses to support all pupils, as well as provide additional help for those with disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs.

7. Enhance the relevance of school education with a view to raising pupils' aspirations and stimulating not just the ability to learn, but also the motivation to learn.

8. Enhance the attractiveness of teaching as a profession, provide relevant in-service training and ensure strong school leadership.

9. Make schools more accountable to society at large, strengthen partnerships between schools and parents, business and local communities, and further integrate formal and non-formal activities.

10. Promote successful inclusive education approaches for all pupils, including those with special needs, by making schools learning communities in which a sense of inclusion and mutual support is nurtured and in which the talents of all pupils are recognised. Monitor the impact of such approaches, in particular with a view to raising access and graduation rates of learners with special needs at all levels of the education system.

With regard to vocational education and training, to

1. Strengthen the acquisition of key competences through vocational pathways and programmes, and better address the needs of disadvantaged learners.

2. Further develop VET provision which allows learners to build their own individualised pathways.

3. Endeavour to ensure that VET systems are properly integrated into the overall education and training systems, including flexible pathways which enable learners to move from one sector to the other, and to employment.

4. Strengthen guidance and counselling activities and relevant teacher training, in order to support students' career choices and transitions within education or from education to employment. This is particularly important for successful integration into the labour market and for the inclusion of students with special needs.

With regard to higher education, to

1. Promote widened access, for example by strengthening financial support schemes for students and through flexible and diversified learning paths.

2. Develop policies aimed at increasing completion rates of higher education, including through strengthening individualised support, guidance and mentoring for students.

3. Continue to eliminate barriers to, expand opportunities for, and improve the quality of, learning mobility, including by providing adequate incentives for the mobility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4. Promote specific programmes for adult students and other non-traditional learners.

With regard to adult education, to

1. Strengthen policies to enable the low-skilled, unemployed adults and, where appropriate, citizens with a migrant background to gain a qualification or take their skills a step further ("one step up"), and broaden the provision of second chance education for young adults.

2. Promote measures to ensure that all have access to the basic skills and key competences needed to live and learn in the knowledge society, in particular literacy and ICT skills.

And in general to strengthen the social dimension of education and training systems by:

1. Increasing the flexibility and permeability of education pathways and removing barriers to participation and to mobility within and between education and training systems

2. Developing closer links between the world of education and the world of work and society at large, with a view to enhancing employability and active citizenship.

3. Establishing systems for the validation and recognition of prior learning, including informal and non-formal learning, and increasing the use of lifelong guidance among disadvantaged and low skilled learners.

4. Evaluating the impact and effectiveness of financial support measures which target the disadvantaged, as well as the effects of the design of educational systems and structures on the disadvantaged.

5. Considering the collection of data on outcomes, drop-out rates and on learners' socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in vocational education and training, higher education and adult education.

6. Considering the establishment of quantified objectives in the area of social inclusion through education which are appropriate to the situation of each Member State.

7. Considering the development of an integrated approach to these objectives, in coordination with other policies.

8. Devoting adequate resources to disadvantaged pupils and schools and, where appropriate, extending the use of the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, in order to reduce social exclusion through education.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO

1. Pursue cooperation on the strategic priority of promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, by actively using the open method of coordination within the context of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020") and by implementing the social dimension of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and adopting measures in line with the 2008 Council conclusions on adult learning.

2. Endeavour to make active use of each strand of the Lifelong Learning Programme and, where appropriate, of the European Social Fund, of the European Regional Development Fund and of the Progress Programme, in order to strengthen social inclusion through education and training, and maintain a strong focus on this dimension in the proposals for the next generation of programmes.

3. Promote and support greater participation of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with special needs, in transnational mobility schemes, partnerships and projects, in particular those established under the Lifelong Learning Programme.

4. Support comparative research on the effectiveness of policies to increase equity in education and training, widen the knowledge base in cooperation with other international organisations and ensure a broad dissemination of research results.

5.   Promote the role of education and training as key instruments for the achievement of the objectives of the social inclusion and social protection process."

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