



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council conclusions on the social dimension of higher education

*3239th EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE and SPORT Council meeting
Brussels, 16-17 May 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, in particular the headline target of increasing the proportion of 30-34 year olds having completed tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40%.
3. The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 establishing a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)¹, which identified the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship as one of its four strategic objectives and emphasised that education and training policy should enable all citizens, irrespective of their personal, social or economic circumstances, to acquire, update and develop over a lifetime both job-specific skills and key skills and competences.

¹ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, pp. 2-10.

P R E S S

4. The Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training², which stressed the importance of ensuring equal opportunities for access to quality education, as well as equity in treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage, and which recognised the economic and social rationale for raising overall education attainment levels and developing high levels of skills and noted that the provision of key skills and competences for all will play a crucial role in improving citizens' employability, social inclusion and personal fulfilment.
5. The Council conclusions of 28 November 2011 on the modernisation of higher education³, which invited the Member States to promote the systematic development of effective strategies to ensure access for under-represented groups and increase efforts to minimise higher education drop-out rates by improving the quality, relevance and attractiveness of courses, in particular through student-centred learning and by providing relevant post-entry support, guidance and counselling.
6. The Bucharest communiqué from Ministers attending the Bologna Process Ministerial conference of 26 and 27 April 2012, in which they agreed to adopt national measures to widen overall access to quality higher education and reiterated the objective that the student body entering and graduating from higher education should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations, along with the specific treatment of the social dimension in higher education in the 2012 Bologna Process implementation report, examining available statistical information on the impact of students' background on participation in higher education and different policy approaches to widening access.
7. The 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*⁴, which in its accompanying staff working document⁵ promotes the development and strengthening of partnerships and flexible pathways for lifelong skills development.
8. The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning⁶, whereby Member States agreed to have arrangements in place for the validation of such learning, with a view to ensuring that individuals are given the opportunity to make use of what they have learned outside formal education and training for their careers as well as for the purpose of further learning, including in higher education.
9. The 2013 Annual Growth Survey, which identifies education as a key driver for growth and competitiveness, alongside innovation and research and development, and underlines the key role of investment in human capital for tackling unemployment and preparing for economic recovery.

² OJ C 135, 26.5.2010, pp. 2-7.

³ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, pp. 36-41.

⁴ 14871/12.

⁵ 14871/12 ADD 6.

⁶ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, pp. 1-5.

10. The ET 2020 peer learning activity on policies and practice to reduce drop-out and improve completion rates in higher education, held in Prague in March 2013, which focused on approaches at national, institutional and European level to improve completion rates and adapt institutional realities to a more diverse student body, underpinned by evidence and analysis.

AGREES THAT

1. While the challenges facing Europe today cannot be resolved by education and training alone, it is critical both in economic and social terms to equip people with the high-level skills and competences that Europe needs, including by striving to secure more equitable access to, participation in and completion of higher education. There are still too many capable individuals who do not participate in higher education for social, cultural or economic reasons or due to insufficient systems of support and guidance.
2. Europe's economic recovery and drive for sustainable growth, including through enhanced research and innovation, are increasingly dependent on its capacity to develop the skills of all its citizens, demonstrating the interdependence of social and economic objectives. In parallel with efforts to improve skills through vocational education and training, high-quality higher education and lifelong learning also have a crucial role to play in enhancing employability and increasing competitiveness, while at the same time promoting the personal and professional development of students and graduates, and stimulating social solidarity and civic engagement.
3. The Bologna Process and subsequent development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the EU agenda for the modernisation of higher education and the Europe 2020 Strategy all demonstrate that European cooperation and shared policy responses have a valuable contribution to make in confronting common challenges through the exchange of good practice, comparative evidence-based policy analysis and the provision of funding support, as well as through helping to provide sustainable mechanisms to facilitate greater mobility of diverse student groups.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, WITH DUE REGARD FOR SUBSIDIARITY AND THE AUTONOMY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS, TO

1. Adopt national objectives which are aimed at increasing the access, participation and completion rates of under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education, with a view to progressing towards the Bologna Process goal that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of Member States' populations.
2. Encourage cooperation between education providers at all levels, including those providing non-formal and informal learning, and other relevant stakeholders, in order to identify the particular groups that may be under-represented in higher education, as well as to promote greater participation of under-represented groups within the teaching profession itself across all sectors of education.

3. Facilitate the development of proactive strategies and related structures at institutional level, including outreach activities and lifelong learning opportunities, the provision of information on educational and labour market-related opportunities and outcomes, guidance on appropriate course choice, peer mentoring, and counselling and support services.
4. Promote permeability and the development of flexible and transparent progression routes into higher education, in particular from vocational education and training and from non-formal and informal learning, facilitated by transparency tools such as national qualifications frameworks linked to the European Qualifications Framework.
5. Increase opportunities for flexible learning by diversifying the way in which learning content is delivered, for instance by adopting student-centred approaches to teaching and learning, by expanding part-time provision, by developing credit-based traineeships, by modularising programmes and distance learning through the use of ICT and by developing quality-assured open educational resources.
6. Explore how funding mechanisms might provide incentives for institutions to develop and deliver quality-assured, flexible learning opportunities.
7. Examine how the overall structure of institutional funding and student financial supports impacts on the participation of under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education and consider how financial supports can be best targeted to improve access, participation and completion rates.
8. Work together with higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders to increase higher education completion rates by improving the quality of the teaching and learning process, in particular through more flexible delivery and the provision of relevant post-entry supports, and by improving the attractiveness of courses and labour market relevance.
9. Examine and seek to reduce any regional and geographical disparities within Member States in terms of access to, participation in, and completion of higher education.
10. Engage in the systematic collection of relevant comparable data - while making optimum use of existing resources - in order to enhance the evidence base for policy development and to enable the effective monitoring of national objectives on access, participation and completion rates among under-represented and disadvantaged groups in higher education.

WELCOMES THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO

Strengthen the evidence base for Europe 2020 in support of Member States' action to increase access, participation and completion rates in higher education by:

- a) embarking on a mapping study of policies on access and drop-out and completion rates in higher education with a view to analysing the effectiveness of different national and institutional approaches and how structural, institutional, personal, socio-cultural and socio-economic factors influence drop-out and completion;
- b) pursuing joint work with Eurostat on a feasibility study to improve the methodology for collecting administrative data on the duration of studies and completion rates in higher education;

- c) developing a study on the influence of different models of funding, or cost-sharing, on the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of higher education in line with commitments in the 2011 agenda for the modernisation of higher education⁷.

AND INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO

1. Pursue work on the social dimension of higher education, for instance by developing peer learning and evidence-based policy analysis on this topic through engagement in the Open Method of Coordination, as well as through working within the Bologna Process and with appropriate bodies and existing initiatives.
2. Use the results and the outcomes of the studies and other work being carried out by the Commission and other relevant sources as a basis for further debate and policy consideration in examining issues of access, participation, completion and the impact of different funding models in relation to higher education.
3. Strengthen synergies between the EU and the Bologna Process in realising the social dimension of higher education by optimising funding support under the post-2013 Union programme in the field of education, training, youth and sport.
4. Utilise the financial support under the Youth Employment Initiative for the provision of targeted opportunities in higher education for disadvantaged or unemployed young people under the age of 25, in order to enable them to acquire employment-specific skills."

⁷ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, pp. 36-41.