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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Draft 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of
the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020)**

New priorities for European cooperation in education and training
{SWD(2015) 161 final}

1. CONTEXT

Europe is facing a number of urgent tasks: restoring job creation and economic recovery, achieving sustainable growth; bridging the investment gap; enhancing social cohesion; giving radicalisation and violence priority attention. At the same time, Europe must address long-term challenges such as ageing, adjusting to the digital era and competing in the global, knowledge-based economy.

Europe's policy response under the new Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change marks a fresh start. There is a strong economic case for education and training as a growth-friendly sector to play a critical role under this new Agenda. Investment in human capital is money well spent. Good education and training help promote sustained economic growth: they fuel R&D, innovation, productivity and competitiveness. As underlined in the 2015 Employment Guidelines, education and training systems should improve their effectiveness and efficiency to raise the skill level of the workforce and address skills mismatches, to better anticipate and meet the rapidly changing needs of labour markets. This is particularly important in an increasingly digital society and for the transition to a circular economy.

The tragic outbursts of violent extremism at the start of 2015 sent a reminder that education and training have an important role in fostering inclusion and equality, cultivating mutual respect and embedding fundamental values in an open and democratic society. By reaching out – in particular to the most disadvantaged – education and training are crucial to prevent and tackle poverty and social exclusion and discrimination, and to build a foundation on which active citizenship rests. Education and training should thus step up efforts to improve access to quality learning for all, thereby fostering upwards social convergence.

Education and training therefore make a substantial contribution to several EU strategies and initiatives, including the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Digital Single Market initiative, the European Agenda on Security and the Investment Plan for Europe, while respecting the competence of Member States for their education and training systems. ET 2020 cooperation complements national action and supports Member States, through peer exchanges, mutual learning and evidence building, in pursuing reforms to further improve their performance.

The Commission's 2014 Education and Training Monitor shows that serious challenges remain:

- 20% of 15 year-olds in the EU score poorly in reading, science and mathematics; 20% of adults have low levels of literacy and numeracy, and 25% have low levels of digital skills – yet only 10.7% take part in lifelong learning and very few low-skilled adults.
- Early school leaving now stands at 11.1% and 19 Member States have reached the Europe 2020 headline target, but there are still more than 5 million early school leavers, with high unemployment rate (41%).

- Higher education attainment continues to improve and is now 37.9%. 16 Member States have met the Europe 2020 headline target, but employability of graduates remains a severe problem in countries most affected by the crisis.

The comprehensive mid-term stocktaking of the ET 2020 strategic framework carried out in 2014, involving Member States and key stakeholders, and providing the basis for this Report, led to three main policy conclusions:

- The great value of an integrated framework covering education and training at all levels was confirmed. Today's need for flexibility and permeability between learning experiences requires policy coherence from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning.
- The ET 2020's four strategic objectives (and current EU benchmarks) remain valid as they were formulated in a comprehensive and forward-looking manner in the ET 2020 Council conclusions of 2009, providing a solid basis for ET 2020 activities up to 2020. However, the policy focus needs to be re-calibrated to include both the pressing economic and employment challenges and the role of education in promoting equity and non-discrimination and in imparting fundamental values, intercultural competences and active citizenship.
- The role of ET 2020 as contributor to the overall EU agenda for jobs, growth and investment, including the European Semester, needs to be further deepened. This implies strengthening evidence building and mutual learning around reform challenges as well as increasing the country specific relevance of the framework.

Against the challenges and policy conclusions set out above, and to better align ET 2020 with the EU's political term and priorities, this Joint Report proposes to steer European cooperation under this framework up to 2020, thus increasing its work cycle from 3 to 5 years.

2. MAIN CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PRIORITIES

On the basis of the stocktaking, and recognizing differences between Member States, this chapter presents the main developments and challenges in European education and training, underpinning the identification – in Annex 1 – of the new *priority areas* and *concrete issues* for further work up to 2020.

2.1. Quality and relevance of learning outcomes is key for skills development

Europe's low levels of basic competences hamper economic progress and severely limit individuals in their professional, social and personal fulfilment. To enhance employability, innovation and active citizenship, basic competences must go hand in hand with other key competences and attitudes: creativity, entrepreneurship and sense of initiative, digital skills (including coding), foreign language competences, critical thinking including through e-literacy and media literacy, and skills reflecting growing sectors, such as the green economy .

The quality of learning outcomes to be stimulated in a lifetime perspective. While 16 Member States have put in place comprehensive lifelong learning strategies, all countries

should develop these strategies and ensure the permeability between various forms and levels of learning and from education and training to work. This requires continued efforts of coordination and partnership between different learning sectors.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the starting point and one of the most efficient means for raising proficiency in key competences, but it faces a double challenge of increasing access and quality. Provision of services for children under 3 years is particularly problematic. Building on the ECEC quality framework developed by Member States during the previous work cycle, key issues for further work include the improvement of access, focusing on the disadvantaged, the professionalisation of staff and efficient governance, funding and monitoring systems.

Measures reducing early school leaving (ESL) have been introduced by all Member States, but do not always add up to a comprehensive strategy as required by the 2011 Council Recommendation. A successful response requires a long-term commitment and cross-sector cooperation, focusing on prevention and early intervention. School-based ESL strategies should include collaborative approaches, partnership with external stakeholders and the community, and improve learning outcomes of all learners.

Higher education (HE) systems should boost the knowledge economy. HE needs to respond effectively to the demands of a changing society and labour market, by ensuring that modernisation focuses on synergies between teaching, research and innovation, linking HE institutions and local communities and regions, and innovative approaches to improve the relevance of curricula, including using information and communication technologies (ICT). Increasing graduation rates remains a challenge for many Member States, especially among disadvantaged groups.

Vocational education and training (VET) graduates show good employment rates in most Member States. Apprenticeships and dual VET schemes are particularly important as they ensure relevant skills which facilitate transitions to the labour market. Member States have taken many measures to implement the deliverables defined in the Bruges Communiqué (2010) for the period 2011-2014 to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET, with an emphasis on work-based learning. For the next work cycle, promoting such learning in all its forms should continue, while reinforcing the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and strengthening anticipation of skills needs for the labour market. Medium-term deliverables (MTDs), as defined in the Riga conclusions of 22 June 2015 (see Annex 2), have sharpened the focus and are limited in number.

Adult learning (AL) is the basis for up-skilling and re-skilling. Recent trends on low basic skills of adults and high unemployment rates make it necessary to reinforce the implementation of the European Agenda for AL. Priorities should include more effective governance, significant increases in supply and take-up, a more flexible offer, broader access, closer monitoring and better quality assurance (see Annex 2).

2.2. Education must contribute to social cohesion, equality, non-discrimination and civic competences

Inequality is at its highest level in 30 years in most European and OECD countries, and has a negative impact on educational outcomes, as education systems tend to reproduce existing patterns of socio-economic status. Breaking the intergenerational cycle of low

qualifications must therefore be a priority. While a majority of Member States has taken measures to improve access to education for disadvantaged learners, a significant educational gap persists and access to good quality mainstream education and training remains a challenge in many parts of the EU. Effective action for inclusive education and training for all learners is needed, focusing on those with disadvantaged backgrounds, special needs, migrants or with a migrant background and Roma. The Youth Guarantee should be fully mobilized.

Gender gaps in education must be tackled and gender differences in educational choices addressed. Bullying and violence in the learning environment, including gender related, cannot be tolerated. Learning institutions and educators must be equipped and supported for learners to experience inclusion, equality, non-discrimination and democratic citizenship in their learning environments.

The Paris Declaration of Education Ministers of 17 March 2015 called for actions at all levels to reinforce the role of education in promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination, strengthening social cohesion and helping young people become responsible, open-minded and active members of our diverse and inclusive society¹. Education is important to prevent and tackle marginalisation and radicalisation. The follow-up to the Declaration is a key priority in the new work cycle, with concrete measures underpinned by funding from the Erasmus+ programme, in line with the four areas identified in the Declaration: (i) promoting the acquisition of social, civic and intercultural competences, enhancing ownership of Europe's fundamental values, and fostering active citizenship (ii) enhancing critical thinking and media literacy (iii) fostering the education of disadvantaged children and young people and (iv) promoting intercultural dialogue.

2.3. Relevant and high-quality learning requires ...

A more active use of innovative pedagogies and digital skills and tools: Several Member States report initiatives to increase teachers' and learners' digital skills and one third have introduced national strategies for digitalisation of education. Still, huge challenges remain. The digital revolution is boosting demand for digital skills and competences; education and training must address this need, which requires investment in infrastructure, organisational change, digital devices and digital competences of educators, and the creation of digital (and open) educational resources and high quality educational software. Education and training should reap the benefits of new ICT developments and adopt innovative and active pedagogies, based on participatory and project-based methods. Open learning environments can help collaboration between educational sectors including for disadvantaged learners.

Strong support for educators: Many Member States report measures for enhancing teacher training and emphasize that initial education and the continuing professional development of teachers and trainers should be fit for purpose, combining subject matter, pedagogy and practice. Educators should be trained to deal with the growing diversity of learners, prevent ESL and use innovative pedagogies and ICT tools in an optimal manner, while enjoying induction support early in their careers.

¹ Non-formal education is important to promote social and democratic participation of young people, which is a priority under the EU cooperation framework in the field of youth; see upcoming 2015 EU Youth Report

Staff shortages increasingly hinder quality instruction in many countries, while interest in teaching careers is in decline. Comprehensive long-term strategies are required to select the most suitable candidates, with diverse backgrounds and experiences, considering that the profession has a strong gender bias, offering them attractive career prospects.

Facilitating learning mobility: The first Mobility Scoreboard (2014) reveals that the environment for learning mobility varies greatly between Member States, with significant barriers remaining in terms of information, student support and recognition. Actions on transparency, quality assurance, validation and recognition of skills and qualifications have to be tracked and pursued. Better data is needed for evidence monitoring on mobility.

Supporting internationalisation in HE will remain a priority, including development of strategic partnerships and joint courses, and promotion of mobility of students, staff and researchers.

Strengthened and simplified EU transparency and recognition tools: Transparency and recognition tools are essential for mobility, employability and lifelong learning, as well as to ensure the use of qualifications acquired outside the EU. Most Member States have developed National Qualifications Frameworks and have referenced these to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Further work should promote a shift from transparency to recognition of qualifications across Europe, by strengthening the role of the EQF and promoting the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Adequate recognition and validation instruments for digitally acquired knowledge, skills and competences can support the uptake of open and innovative learning practices. Particular attention should be given to simplifying and rationalising existing EU instruments on skills and qualifications directed to the wider public to strengthen outreach.

Filling the investment gap: Effective investment in quality education and training is a source of sustainable growth. Yet, since the crisis public budgets remain tight and several Member States cut their education and training expenditure in real terms. This suggests the need to support Member States in designing reforms that deliver quality education and training more efficiently, within a broad societal context. The Investment Plan for Europe (IPE), Erasmus+, the European Structural and Investment Funds, including the Youth Employment Initiative and Horizon 2020 can help stimulate investments and support ET 2020 policy priorities ensuring strong links with policies.

3. GOVERNANCE AND WORKING METHODS

Since the 2012 Joint Report, the governance of ET 2020 has improved, in particular by strengthening evidence building (the Education and Training Monitor) and the operational character of Working Groups and regular platforms for exchanges between key stakeholders such as the Education, Training and Youth (ETY) Forum. The stocktaking indicates a consensus on the following approach for the next work cycle:

- ***Strong analytical evidence and progress monitoring*** are essential for the effectiveness of the ET 2020 framework, and will be done in cooperation with Eurostat, Eurydice network, Cedefop, OECD and other organisations.

- Streamlining and **rationalising reporting** within the ET 2020 framework remain a priority and will be aided by the extension of the work cycle to 5 years;
- **Stronger links between education, business and research, and involvement of social partners and civil society** will strengthen the impact of ET 2020 and the relevance of learning systems to increase Europe's innovation capacity. Knowledge Alliances, Sector Skills Alliances under Erasmus+, Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology under Horizon 2020 are trend-setting in this respect. Engagement with stakeholders will also be stimulated through the ETY Forum, the European University–Business Forum, the VET-Business Forum and Thematic Fora in Member States. Cooperation with European civil society and European social partners will be pursued to allow an optimal use of their expertise and outreach capacity.

The ET 2020 tools have proved their worth but have not always had effective impact at national level, notably due to a lack of synchronization of activities, shortcomings in dissemination and low national awareness of the usefulness of results. The ET 2020 tool box will be strengthened:

- To improve transparency and coherence of ET 2020 activities, the Commission in cooperation with the Member States (including the trio of Council Presidencies) will prepare an **ET 2020 indicative rolling Work Plan** integrating and providing a clear overview of peer learning events and key activities planned in the ET 2020 Working Groups and informal groups of senior officials, i.e. the meetings of the Directors General for schools, VET and HE (DG meetings) and the High Level Group on Education and Training.
- As of 2016 a new generation of **Working Groups** will work on the **ET 2020 priority areas**. The Groups will report to the relevant informal groups of senior officials who provide steering and filter relevant outputs for the attention of the Council. Innovative working methods will be encouraged and the outputs of the Groups will be better disseminated catering for real knowledge sharing.
- **ET 2020 peer learning activities**, usually part of Working Groups, will be strengthened and enable Member States sharing similar policy challenges to work in clusters. **Peer reviews** in the context of DG meetings focusing on country specific challenges have proved useful but require more preparation and interactive dialogue. Tailor-made **peer counselling** can support a particular national reform agenda.
- The **dissemination of good practices** and lessons learned, using international evidence when relevant, will be enhanced through thematic events, policy learning exchanges and any arrangement for knowledge transfer and exchange on what works in education.
- The **Education and Training Monitor**, synchronised with the European Semester and providing up-to-date thematic and country specific evidence (including strong points and challenges), will be used systematically to inform policy debates at Council level and the European Parliament in discussions on education challenges and reforms.

- Full use will be made of the potential of *Erasmus+* for increasing the impact of the ET 2020 tools, including by anchoring the preparation for policy experimentations in the Working Groups and using evidence gathered through excellent projects.

ANNEX 1: PRIORITY AREAS FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The mid-term stocktaking confirmed the four ET 2020 *strategic objectives* set by the Council in 2009:

1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship;
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Within these strategic objectives, the stocktaking exercise highlighted the common objective of Member States to streamline the current priority areas for action. The table below proposes **a reduction from 13 to 6 priority areas**, each of which can contribute to one or more strategic objectives, for the period up to 2020, fully coherent with and contributing to the overall EU political priorities.

In the table below, the priority areas are declined into *concrete issues*, in response to the Council's request for a more concrete indication of matters for future work. These areas will be followed-up through the ET 2020 working methods and its tool box; they (i) reflect a common challenge for the Member States; and (ii) show an added value in tackling them at European level.

Member States will select, in accordance with national priorities, those areas and issues for work and cooperation in which they wish to participate.

	PRIORITY AREAS	CONCRETE ISSUES
1	<p>Relevant and high-quality skills and competences, focusing on learning outcomes, for employability, innovation and active citizenship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing targeted policy action to reduce low achievement in basic competences across Europe, covering literacy, mathematics, science and digital literacy • Strengthening the development of transversal skills and key competences, in line with the Reference Framework on Key Competences for lifelong learning, in particular digital, entrepreneurship and linguistic competences through common EU frameworks and self-assessment tools such as HEInnovate • Re-igniting lifelong learning strategies addressing the transition phases within school education, while promoting transitions to and between VET, HE and AL, including non-formal and informal learning, and from education and training to work • Fostering access to high-quality ECEC, especially for the disadvantaged, and implementing the quality framework on ECEC • Reducing ESL by supporting school-based strategies and second chance opportunities, emphasizing effective learning environments and pedagogies • Promoting the labour market and societal relevance of HE, including through better intelligence and anticipation about labour market needs and outcomes, new forms of curriculum, more work based learning and enhanced cooperation between institutions and employers • Implementing Riga MTDs in VET (see Annex 2), while reinforcing the European Alliance for Apprenticeships and strengthen the anticipation of skills needs for the labour market • Implementing the European Agenda for AL (see Annex 2)
2	<p>Inclusive education, equality, non-discrimination and promotion of civic competences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing the increasing diversity of learners and enhancing access to good quality and inclusive mainstream education and training for all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special needs, migrants and Roma, while tackling discrimination, racism, segregation, bullying, violence and stereotypes • Tackling gender gaps in education and promoting more gender balanced educational choices • Facilitating the effective acquisition of the language of learning and employment by migrants • Promoting civic, intercultural, social and relational competences, mutual understanding and respect, and ownership of democratic values and fundamental rights • Enhancing critical thinking and cyber and media literacy

3	<p>Open and innovative education and training, including by fully embracing the digital era</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstreaming innovative and active pedagogies such as interdisciplinary teaching and collaborative methods, to enhance the development of relevant and high-level skills and competences while fostering inclusive education, including for disadvantaged and learners with disabilities • Fostering participatory education governance by stimulating engagement of learners, educators, parents and the broader local community such as civil society groups, social partners and business • Increasing synergies between education, research and innovation activities, with a sustainable growth perspective, building on developments in HE, with a new focus on VET and schools • Promoting the use of ICT as a driver for systemic change to increase quality and relevance of education at all levels • Boosting availability and quality of open and digital educational resources and pedagogies at all education levels, in cooperation with European open source communities • Addressing the development of digital skills and competences at all levels of learning in response to the digital revolution
4	<p>Strong support for educators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening recruitment, selection and induction of the best and most suitable candidates for the teaching profession • Raising the attractiveness and prestige of the teaching profession, including through comprehensive strategies • Supporting initial education and continuing professional development of educators, especially to deal with increased diversity of learners, ESL, work based learning, digital competences and innovative pedagogies, including through EU tools such as eTwinning, the School Education Gateway and the ePlatform for AL in Europe (EPALE) • Promoting excellence in teaching at all levels, through programme design, learning organisation and incentive structures, and exploring new ways to measure the quality of teacher training
5	<p>Transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to facilitate learning and labour mobility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering transparency, quality assurance, validation and recognition of skills and qualifications, including those acquired through digital, online and open learning and the validation of informal and non-formal learning • Simplifying and rationalising the transparency, documentation, validation and recognition tools that involve direct outreach to learners, workers and employers and promoting the use of qualifications frameworks • Supporting the mobility of students, staff and researchers and the development of strategic partnerships and joint courses by increasing HE internationalisation

6	Sustainable investment, performance and efficiency of education and training systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring the potential of the IPE in the area of education and training, including by promoting funding models attracting private actors and capital • Encouraging Member States to use evidence based policy-making to monitor policies and design reforms that deliver quality education more efficiently • Encouraging innovative ways to ensure sustainable investment in all forms and levels of learning, including performance-based funding and cost-sharing
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ANNEX 2: SPECIFIC VET AND ADULT LEARNING PRIORITIES UP TO 2020

The sectorial agendas for VET (the Copenhagen-Bruges process) and the Renewed European Agenda for AL require a more detailed identification – and endorsement via this Joint Report – of the deliverables/ priorities for the period up to 2020.

Riga MTDs for VET

- Promoting **work-based learning** in all its forms, with special attention to apprenticeships, by involving social partners, companies, chambers and VET providers, as well as by stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship
- Further developing **quality assurance** mechanisms in VET in line with EQAVET recommendation and, as part of quality assurance systems, establishing continuous **information and feedback loops to IVET and C-VET systems based on learning outcomes**
- Enhancing **access to VET and qualifications for all** through more flexible and permeable systems, notably by offering efficient and integrated guidance services and making available validation of non-formal and informal learning
- Further strengthening **key competences** in VET curricula and providing more effective opportunities to acquire or develop those skills through I-VET and C-VET
- Introducing systematic approaches to, and opportunities for, **initial and continuous professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors** in both school and work-based settings

Renewed European Agenda for AL priorities

- **Governance:** ensure coherence of adult learning with other policy areas, improve coordination, effectiveness and relevance to needs of society, economy and the environment; increase investment
- **Supply and take up:** significantly increase the supply of high quality AL provision, especially in literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and increase take-up through effective outreach, guidance and motivation strategies targeting groups most in need
- **Flexibility and access:** widen access by increasing availability of workplace-based learning and making effective use of ICT; put in place procedures to identify and assess the skills of low qualified adults and provide sufficient second-chance opportunities leading to a recognised EQF qualification for those without level 3 qualifications
- **Quality:** improve quality assurance, including monitoring and impact assessment, improve initial and continuing education of adult educators and collect necessary data on needs to effectively target and design provision