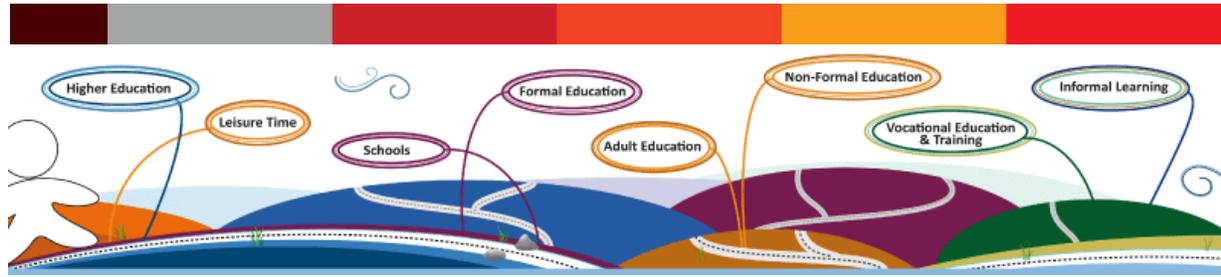


SOLIDAR & EUCIS-LLL Round Table: Social dimension of education & training: Investing in skills and competences



16 March 2011

SOLIDAR and the European Civil Society Platform on Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL) organised a Round Table hosted by MEP Maria Badia I Cutchet (S&D) and chaired by Conny Reuter (SOLIDAR). With interventions by Natalya Gryazeva (Education and Science Workers' Trade Union in Latvia), Fionnuala Richardson (The People's College in Ireland), David Lopez (La Ligue de l'Enseignement, France), Doris Pack MEP (EPP), Elisabeth. Schroedter MEP (Greens-EFA), Mary Honeyball MEP (S&D), Marie Christine Vergiat MEP (GUE/NGL), Jeff Bridgford (special advisor ETUC) and Gyula Hegyi (European Commission, Cabinet of Commissioner Laszlo Andor). The debated was concluded by Regina Ebner (President of EUCIS-LLL).

Summary

Education and training/lifelong learning figures prominently in the Europe 2020 Strategy as a method of promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. However in times of crisis and change, the austerity measures put in place by EU Member States are having an adverse effect by acting on investment in education and training. This Round Table gave a possibility to lifelong learning practitioners, stakeholders and Members of the European Parliament to exchange views and establish a dialogue on promoting investment on skills and competences development amongst socially and economically vulnerable groups.

Full Report

Conny Reuter (SOLIDAR Secretary General) and Chair of the Round Table welcomed participants. He presented the programme and explained that SOLIDAR and EUCIS-LLL had invited practitioners to present the impact of national austerity measures on education and training in their countries. Conny Reuter also welcomed the MEPs and expressed appreciation for their presence and support.

Maria Badia i Cutchet MEP (S&D) opened the Round Table by stating that the austerity measures are counter-productive to EU policies, like the Europe 2020 Strategy. She underlined that the development of human capital is the key to the success of the Europe 2020 Agenda.



In 2008 an important lifelong learning agenda¹ was launched. By 2020 35% of jobs will require higher qualifications compared to today (25%). In Europe a small number of students study outside of EU while 1 million Chinese study abroad. Europe is lagging behind; we need a larger action to correct this trend. There is a need to upgrade people's skills and encourage innovation and creativity. More needs to be done especially in adult education. This is particular important to overcome the challenges of an ageing population. Today only 4% of the Lifelong Learning Plan (LLP) goes to adult education (through the Grundtvig programme).

The EU has to be competitive and have a sustainable economy before 2020. Hence the necessity to invest in education and jobs requiring high qualification. The key priority must be to find a balance between budgetary constraints and economic pressures versus the need to upgrade the skills of our citizens.

Presentation by practitioners on impact of national austerity measures on education and training in their countries

Natalya Gryazeva, (Education and Science Workers' Trade Union, Latvia) presented the impact of national austerity measures in Latvia. She reported that since the economic crisis in 2008, the country faced devastating cuts (subsidies reduced in different sectors by 48% in 2009 and 10% in 2010). The National Strategies for Lifelong Learning in Latvia is based on people's changing needs to acquire knowledge, skills and experience in order to promote or change their qualifications according to the requirements of the labour market. [See presentation...](#)

Fionnuala Richardson (The People's College, Ireland) enumerated the difficulties that universities face: massive cuts in salaries and recruitment. Universities and institutions of technology have seen student fees increase, but a reduction of 7% in government support. They also face funding cuts of 22 million Euros at a time when demand for training is increasing. [See presentation...](#)

David Lopez (La Ligue de l'Enseignement, France) put emphasis on the reduction of resources available (100,000 civil servant job cuts before 2013 and a drop of 10% in operating expenditures). He also noticed the decrease in support for associations. [See presentation...](#)

Feedback By Members Of The European Parliament

Doris Pack, MEP and Chair of the Education Committee (EPP) reminded participants that *"we cannot make too much change. Even with good ideas there is a lack of money. The Institutions can only work with the money they get. We have a situation where we need good jobs and good skills but at the EU level there is limited money and limited power. We need better structures. Teachers need to review their skills."* She also mentioned the need to deal with adults in an ageing and rapidly changing society. Even if the EU has no power it can still make some recommendations to Member States and enable them to exchange practices. The Internal Market can only function if people are skilled but EC programmes are too small to answer all these challenges. Together we have to try to convince Member States of the importance of investing in these programmes.

¹ As part of the Europe 2020 Strategy 'An Agenda for new skills and jobs' is the Commission's contribution to reaching the EU employment rate target of 75 % for women and men for the 20-64 years age group by 2020.



Elisabeth Schroedter, MEP (Greens-EFA) underlined the need to pay special attention to decent work, skills needs and a socially just transition in all types of employment, be they high-, medium- or low-skilled, paying particularly attention to people furthest from the labour market, the most vulnerable, especially disabled people and low-skilled workers. She was disappointed by the agenda for new skills and jobs: *“according to the agenda, the key issue is the adaptation to labour market requirements. The Employment Guidelines should be formulated in a way which actively support the increased employment of workers aged below 25 and above 50 and pay due attention to the specific challenges faced by young and elderly people”.*

Mary Honeyball, MEP (S&D) was in favour of a strong commitment from the EU on education and training and regretted that this sector bore the weight of cuts. This is a very short sighted policy in a period where in fact we need more investments in education and training. At the EU level they have no power to compel Member States they can only raise these issues, for instance when they discuss about the flagship initiatives. Furthermore the EU operates on a worldwide stage: *“we are now global, there is no way that we can compete with emerging economies on manufacturing, but we can compete on the knowledge economy, but for that, we need higher levels of education and of course investment in this”.* There is a huge imbalance today between high and low qualified citizens in accessing knowledge. We need to look at the structures so that they can become more accessible. The Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) will be an important element; Member States need to put “strategic money” in this funding. The allocation of resources is crucial. In times of crisis we need an educated workforce. We need to get this message across.

Marie Christine Vergiat, MEP (GUE/NGL) also agreed that adaptation to the labour market is not enough. Education and training is fundamental, it is linked to our democratic model. *“There is a high level of unemployment for young people. Moreover those who work often have “casual” jobs. The budget restrictions affect mostly public services and the working class. Education is the future; we cannot sacrifice it and increase inequalities.”* It is still difficult to move forward with a number of topics at the European level. We often forget the fundamental objectives for instance to ensure access to employment but also to ensure decent work. Europe has regularly been hit by crises. It is crucial to “implement a genuine citizens dialogue on these issues. The European Parliament is the place for European citizenship.”

Mr Jeff Bridgford (Special Advisor ETUC) recommended supporting top quality initial education, to enable equal access to education and training and to recognise and validate non-formal and informal learning. It is also important to develop access to Vocational Education and Training (VET) in working life. We should also make the best of EU initiatives such as EQF, ECTS, LLP, etc. These instruments should be safeguarded and developed, and new frameworks should be introduced where they do not exist at all. The targets set in the Europe 2020 Strategy are very ambitious but there is insufficient support behind them. It will be very depressing in 2020 when we look back and see that we did not do enough to reach these objectives. See [ETUC's Resolution: More investment in lifelong learning for quality jobs](#).

Debate

The **debate** brought out the following points

- Lifelong learning should start from age 0. And invest in early childhood education and care services with highly qualified personal.
- Today there is too much focus on employability, social and personal skills are equally important. It is important to recognise the role of non-formal education.

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- Specific role of parents: they should be taken seriously as educators, need structural support for that.
 - The real question is how to learn from the mistakes we have made at national and European levels. The Lisbon strategy failed. We should look at solutions for example to have a more regular dialogue between the EP and civil society organisations. Many people are not aware of the EU 2020 Strategy.
 - The European Parliament and Commission have little power in this sector but some directives such as Bolkenstein or the decision on the “Flexicurity model” were adopted at EU level with important consequences at national level for education and training. The European Parliament’s Culture and Education committee should initiate regular dialogue with organised civil society.

Gyula Hegyi (European Commission, Member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Laszlo Andor) mentioned the fact that one million young persons in EU leave school without finishing primary school. Moreover we cannot reach the target of 75% without acting with target groups such as migrants, Roma, elderly people and women. The European Social Fund is not properly used, some Member States do not use all the allocated funds and the process is very complicated. We have to work together to improve this and ensure that funds are better spent.

Conclusions

Ms Gina Ebner (President EUCIS-LLL) concluded that the situation is very grave in many countries and education and training are suffering from budget cuts. Today’s debate raised the importance of lifelong learning, in which lifelong learning was understood as a lifelong occupation covering formal, non-formal and informal learning. In this perspective, bridges between different sectors (adult education, VET, etc.) have to become more efficient to combat social exclusion.

Learning has many functions; it is about employability and about individual empowerment. In these times of crisis more has to be invested in learning: to support people on a personal level to deal with the crisis as well as to enable them to voice their concerns and needs.

The right to education should be extended to lifelong learning. It is crucial to ensure quality for all. Certain vulnerable groups are further away from learning, and their engagement in lifelong learning is crucial. This is not only about access but also about providing a specific support, answering their specific needs, avoiding segregation and promoting social inclusion and social cohesion.

Greater political commitment is needed amongst Member States to invest in Lifelong Learning (LLP) as well as to ensure that European Social Fund promotes social inclusion and social cohesion through lifelong learning at the grass roots level. To that end **EUCIS-LLL hopes to setup an informal network with members of the European Parliament** to see to development on the following action points:

- Ensure access to lifelong learning for all
- Create synergies between lifelong learning sub-sectors
- Invest in innovative and qualitative learning
- Strengthen a long-term political commitment of public authorities at all levels
- Support the role of civil society organisations
- Improve and foster sustainable financing/funding mechanisms

To that end, tools such as the **recognition and validation of non-formal or informal learning (prior learning) have to be developed to get people back on board, with more attention on “soft” skills competences and knowledge**. Investments should be made in systems that work for the people, supporting the further development of best practices and allowing greater impact.

For further reading:



- EUCIS-LLL position paper on austerity measures, lifelong learning and social cohesion
- SOLIDAR briefing paper: Investing in new skills, competences and knowledge