

## **BRUSSELS, 25 November - Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education's reaction to the European Commission Communication on Achieving a European Education Area by 2025**

On September 30th, the European Commission unveiled its plans for three long-awaited strategic proposals: on the [Digital Education Action Plan \(2021-2027\)](#), the [European Research Area](#), and the [European Education Area to be achieved by 2025](#). The Communications outline a number of actions for the next five years. The Lifelong Learning Platform welcomes the new wide-ranging vision for European education and training as an acknowledgment of the key role it plays to Europe's social and sustainable future. We also welcome the historic moment where linking research and education is becoming a reality.

The announced Education Package is not new to many, the European Education Area was first announced in the meeting of EU leaders at the Gothenburg Social Summit<sup>1</sup> in November 2017 as a step forward for EU-level cooperation in the field of education and training that would contribute to a greater social Europe<sup>2</sup>. Following the Social Summit, a set of measures were launched in the Communication in May 2018 "[Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies](#)" in reaction to which LLLP put forward a number of recommendations<sup>3</sup>. In this reaction, LLLP puts forward a number of recommendations to support further development of the European Education Area and highlights a number of aspects that require further effort for achieving its holistic vision.

### **Policy Coherence, Building Synergies**

Access to quality education and lifelong learning for all has been recognised as the first key principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and rightly so. Ensuring its implementation will depend on the policy coherence and synergies across all sectors. The Communication addresses this issue to a great extent and is very reassuring. However, the actual implementation of the Social Pillar will require a major effort from policy and decision makers as well as stakeholder organisations to break existing silos in the different measures and mechanisms such as EU programmes<sup>4</sup> and policies.

Efforts should also be made to adopt a true lifelong learning approach, in this regard the prominent focus of the Education Package on formal education is a major concern. We believe that the links between EEA and the New Skills Agenda could be strengthened by better recognising the interdependence between them as a key factor to success. The link to twin transitions (green and digital), albeit welcomed, connects to the EEA actions vaguely, addressing investment in innovating learning and teaching and mostly focusing on infrastructures' needs. The six dimensions highlighted in the EEA Communication, while seemingly ambitious, could have been better aligned to the aspired holistic vision expected to cover all education

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<sup>1</sup> Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth: strengthening the EU's social dimension, 2017 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-4643\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4643_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> LLLP Statement, The future of Europe is a Learning Europe for all its citizens! September 2017 [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LLLP-Position\\_Future-of-Europe.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LLLP-Position_Future-of-Europe.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> LLLP Statement, 2nd Education Package! August 2018 [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Draft-statement\\_22-May-package.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Draft-statement_22-May-package.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> EU Programmes such as: ESF, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe, Values Fund, Digital Europe, Invest EU and Recovery plan, among others

sectors and levels in a comprehensive way and to bring all strategies and policies around education, training and learning together. The announced packages of Communications are clearly interlinked but they each differently express their intentions to more synergies between research, innovation and education. There is a need to address policy coherence and synergies to maximise the potential of these initiatives.

## **Evolution, Not Revolution!**

While we welcome a number of new initiatives announced in the European Education Area, we would like to see a continuation in EU policies in the field. Innovation should start from where we are, what we have achieved so far and what we have learned from the past. The Education Package should ensure there is a continuation of the first package of measures launched in 2018, allowing education and training providers to fully reflect on the ongoing measures, their implementation and additional measures to enrich them, while embracing new ones in a coherent and informed way. We would like to see a clear continuum between packages, which should not entail any cleavage and, on the contrary, shall allow education stakeholders and communities to build upon past achievements.

The announced Education Package stresses the importance of transversal skills and basics skills, a demand that has been made by stakeholders for over a decade. We would like to stress that measures aimed at transversal skills should be a continuation and thus build upon the work initiated by the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning<sup>5</sup>, revised in January 2018, which reflects the way forward in developing these competencies in a lifelong learning approach and for which the implementation has not yet been fully accomplished. This will be essential to ensure coherence and consistency in the usage of terminology around skills development. Another example where we notice a lack of continuity concerns the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition for learning periods abroad in upper secondary education, while recognition in Higher Education is highlighted several times in the communication. For more insights about the importance of such continuation please refer to the LLLP Statement from August 2018<sup>6</sup>.

## **“Ambitious” Agenda, Ambitious Funding!**

Investment in education and training at Member State and European level is crucial, with only five years to achieve the European Education Area in the middle of a global crisis will require investment in quality education, infrastructure and services, to allow all citizens to access learning opportunities for life and work. The new EU budget MFF 2021-2027 and the Recovery Plan should pay important attention to increasing the education and training offer for all groups, no matter their age or socioeconomic background. In times of crisis, education and training remain the most powerful solution to empower citizens and help society recover from its social and economic repercussions. Therefore, the Erasmus+ budget for the years to come will need to be at least tripled. Today, it does not even represent 1% of the EU funding in education and training - far from enough to improve the programme’s social dimension.

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<sup>5</sup> LLLP Reaction to the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, April 2017 <http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/KeyCompetenciesreactionLLLP-1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> LLLP Statement to Education Package, May 2018 [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Draft-statement\\_22-May-package.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Draft-statement_22-May-package.pdf)

Mainstreaming funding in education and training in the different EU programmes mentioned in the Communication, such as European Structural and Investment Fund, InvestEU, Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, Recovery and Resilience Facility among others will be key to achieve this ambitious vision for European Education Area by 2025. So as to create synergies between programmes through cooperation, we see *meetings between Finance and Education Ministers*<sup>7</sup> as a first step in the right direction towards this goal.

Last but not least, it is about time for Europe to realise that the right to education and training cannot stop at graduation, so shouldn't public service. Education and training are public goods<sup>8</sup> and as such we wish to see Europe recognising the universal Entitlement to Lifelong Learning through the development of Individual Learning Accounts accessible to all no matter where citizens stand in the social sphere beyond the working force. This initiative exists in some Member States and should be improved in order to serve all learners in a lifelong learning approach. This also means investing in learning opportunities, improving adult education and personal and professional training while ensuring its quality is not jeopardized by commercialisation.

## **Social Dimension of Education, Equity over Equality!**

The vision of the European Education Area puts a great focus on inclusion and equality, which we welcome to strengthen the social dimension of education and training systems. We are however concerned that with such an ambitious agenda and the many initiatives announced, quantity will prevail over quality to the detriment of the social dimension of the EU programmes, such as the Erasmus+. To this extent, it is pivotal to ensure that EU programmes do not end up widening the already alarming gap between learners. Such a gap exists because not all citizens start on equal footing when it comes to learning opportunities: socioeconomic background and difficult circumstances might hinder their participation in education, training, mobility and lifelong learning programmes. Because of this, it is our collective duty to make sure that the upcoming measures are informed with principles of equity, rather than equality, in order to protect and raise those who are most in need.

We believe that ensuring everyone begins their journey on the same starting line also means addressing their social and material needs to start with. Especially when it comes to the Digital Education Action Plan, as mentioned in our Statement on "*Reimagining Education for the Digital Age*"<sup>9</sup>, more pragmatic actions need to be foreseen, as not all households have multiple devices or access to internet connection, nor the basic skills to reap all the benefits of digital education - an issue that has come to the forefront with the Covid-19 crisis. However, without an unwavering financial support, the equity principle will be lost in European programmes, and so will the social dimension of education. Most of the EU programmes, including the Erasmus+, already carry the infamous label of being elitist: let's turn the tide.

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<sup>7</sup> LLLP News Meeting of Ministers of Education: Citizenship Education in the Digital Era, November 2019 <http://lllplatform.eu/news/meeting-of-ministers-of-education-citizenship-education-in-the-digital-era/>

<sup>8</sup> LLLP Position Paper *The future of Europe is a learning Europe*, April 2017 <http://lllplatform.eu/news/future-europe-learning-europe/>

<sup>9</sup> LLLP Position Paper *Reimagining Education for the Digital Age*, September 2017 [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper\\_final-1.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigitalPaper_final-1.pdf)

## Research With and For Learners and Society!

Ensuring that all programmes are informed with a holistic lifelong learning approach encompasses research and research policies. As LLLP we would like to remind that research and innovation do not serve the labour market or industries' needs, but the interests of our society as a whole. Hence, it is important that the advancement of our complex and heterogeneous European society is looked at with a humanist vision and that we are able to carry out research and innovation as means for societal progress rather than economic growth. We welcome the explicit reference in [European Research Area](#) Communication that we need to link Research and Innovation with education and training to put the EU's scientific knowledge to work, to match generational challenges such as Europe's shared values of democracy, solidarity and equality as assets to build on.

Research is pivotal to the advancement of society especially in times of an economic, social and health crisis that has further increased pre-existing inequalities. It's important that the European Research Area also serve the needs of education and training systems to become more inclusive. This can only be achieved if learners' needs are put at the heart of the research work. The social mission of the research needs to reflect citizens' concerns and allow citizens to take active roles through the civil society organisations they engage with. The Communication rightly puts emphasis on the decisive role of research and innovation (University Alliances), the green transition (Researchers at School) and exploring the role of gender in education and training, but forgets a range of other social issues within education and training systems that can benefit from it, such as inclusion of people with special needs.

The emphasis on the training of teachers, educators, trainers and all supporting staff in the education and training systems being in formal education institutions, non-formal education providers and /or informal learning environments is a major milestone in achieving the European Education Area. The European effort on research and innovation, cooperation and peer-learning can support such development.

## Equal Value to Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning!

The Lifelong Learning Platform in its 2019 annual Position Paper<sup>10</sup> on “*21st century learning environments*” urges fostering flexible learning pathways, by supporting people in accessing and moving across learning environments (from early childhood to adult education, from formal, non-formal to informal learning) as they progress through life, in accordance with their needs and regardless of age or background. In this sense, the EEA should equally value different learning environments, concentrating on the learning outcomes. The reference to recognition of prior learning regrettably only translates into non-formal education to youth work and/or volunteering and a higher education perspective, which constitute only a part of it.

In addition, neither the revised Skills Agenda launched in July 2020, nor the EEA have a clear and explicit vision on how recognition of non-formal and informal learning will concretely be achieved. For example,

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<sup>10</sup> LLLP Position Paper 21st Century Learning Environments, October 2019 <http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LLP-Position-paper-21CLE.pdf>

there is no comprehensive follow-up action plan foreseen on the implementation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on Validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) that would build on the ‘lessons learned’ of the European Commission’s evaluation. Since the Recommendation did not succeed to achieve its goals by 2019, such as making validation a ‘reality for all’ and since its implementation remains limited in most EU countries. We believe that it should be updated to prioritise the implementation of arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. These arrangements should be universally accessible, inspired by the key guiding principle of social equity as well as the meaningful participation of stakeholders from all sectors affected by validation processes. The revision should embrace the key role played by national educational councils where they already exist, or could support the development thereof where they are absent, in enhancing developments in this context. It should also take into account the needs of re- and up-skilling in view of the digital and green transitions, as well as to provide solutions not solely to develop transversal skills but to also validate them.

Throughout the EU, many organisations have developed innovative and inclusive validation tools and methods of which, notably, assessment methods could further inspire formal education systems into modernising their own assessment methods - which remain a major issue and require important attention. This would be highly beneficial for learners with adverse school experiences for instance and help reducing drop-out rates<sup>11</sup>. We invite the EU institutions to consider facilitating more exchange and cooperation between stakeholders in this regard.

We welcome the focus on volunteering and non-formal learning as means to acquire life and professional skills and competences, as well as the intention to update policy guidance in 2021 to address the legal, financial and administrative barriers that still hinder youth cross-border volunteering and solidarity. However, we urge the Commission to pay particular attention to professional development and financial support for the supporting staff and volunteer mentors who facilitate and make cross-border volunteering possible. The valorisation of learning and competences acquired through volunteering should go hand in hand with supporting the creation or development of national volunteering platforms in all EU countries as well as more cross-sectoral exchange opportunities between countries. It is important for any future development in VNFIL to go beyond market needs and address societal needs too.

## **Lifelong Learning for Sustainable and Social Europe in the world!**

We firmly believe in the role of lifelong learning as the best tool to tackle today’s complex social challenges and build sustainable societies. And so does the European Commission, as vividly noted in the very first heading of [the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [New European Green Deal](#). Therefore, we are happy to see that it followed up on previous ambitions through a renewed lifelong learning approach in the latest Education package.

The most important dimension of education lies in the individual potential that it unlocks. If learners are nurtured, exposed to critical thinking, given room and space to express themselves, it will bring about a

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<sup>11</sup> LLLP EU-funded project [“Innovative assessments methods for validation”](#)

positive social impact on all aspects of society. Therefore, we wish for the next actions to ensure that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and most of all lifelong learning opportunities, in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successful transitions in the labour market. This is at the heart of building a sustainable future for all. Therefore, it will be crucial for the new education and training framework (post ET2020) to align to 2030 Agenda. We hope for the newly-launched actions to reinforce the global dimension of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as to contribute to the true internationalisation of all education institutions. These latter need a window on the global challenges to be able to survive a competitive world, build resilience to unwelcomed challenges and craft their pedagogies for a globalised world.

The Lifelong Learning Platform warmly welcomes the European Commission's aim to establish a Coalition about Education for Climate by the end of 2020 to mobilise experts, provide resources for networking and support creative approaches with teachers, pupils and students. However, notable actors are missing: civil society organisations. Moreover, we call for this initiative to build on existing networks and alliances around this issue. Especially when it comes to Education for Sustainable Development, organised civil society and grassroot movements are at the forefront of the experiential learning necessary to develop competences in this new area; their active participation can be paramount in view of the Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability expected in 2021. As mentioned in our previous position papers (2019), the rich diversity of learning environments, whether within the formal education system or beyond in the local community, workplace or civil society, is more valuable than ever to meet these rapidly evolving needs. This also means taking the climate emergency more seriously and facilitating more partnerships between formal and non-formal education to address the needs of society (e.g. the Education Climate Coalition).

### **...and do it not “for” but “with” civil society and education providers!**

In a dramatic moment for Europe, where we (re)discover the need to tackle transversal issues through a multi-stakeholder approach, it is regretful to see little mention of cooperation with civil society in the lines of this education package. There is a growing need for cross-sector cooperation, between education and training providers, employers, trade unions, public employment services, guidance services, civil society and local authorities in order to build an ecosystem that gives value to the objectives outlined in the European Education Area and in the other communications, and meets the criteria of all stakeholders.

The unique role of civil society is to voice citizens' concerns through spontaneous, organised and bottom-up structures that require and deserve room in the decision-making processes; such a role cannot and shall not go underestimated. To quote Fernando Henrique Cardoso, twenty years ago: “civil society is an expression of the social and cultural complexity of the global community and a strong promoter of multilateralism”. To achieve this, we urge the European Commission to take meaningful steps in setting up a ‘Steering Board for the European Education Area’ as well as a more clearly defined governance framework with the constant, meaningful and active involvement of European civil society organisations, such as LLLP, and education stakeholders, as co-creators and co-managers rather than simply bystanders.

An explicit mention of the role of EU NGOs is missing in the update of the European Education Area, but their contribution to achieving its objectives is substantial.

In recent years the Lifelong Learning Platform with its broad and diverse membership has been a constant partner in the peer-learning activities organised by the European Commission: let's make sure such inputs are not lost and let's work together to step up and upscale such initiatives. On top of this, a structural support to existing networks with dedicated actions would strengthen their invaluable role in reaching out to rural and marginalised learners. Moreover, thanks to years of direct experience, civil society networks have developed specific on-field expertise that would have a drastic and beneficial impact in EU roundtables.

There is a lot under the hat of cross-sector cooperation, and - as the European Parliament put it - to "build closer cooperation and dialogue with representatives of civil society, recognising that their experience on the ground is essential to achieving [education and training] goals"<sup>12</sup>. We are prepared for it.

## Takeaways for a transparent and coordinated governance

The Lifelong Learning Platform supports the vision for creating a European Education Area as a way to foster the European perspective of education and training as it has been highlighted in our statement in March 2017 calling for a Learning Europe "*The future of Europe is a Learning Europe for all its citizens*"<sup>13</sup>.

We believe that to achieve the European Education Area by 2025, policy coherence and synergies between different EU tools and measures is essential, as well as a continuation of existing ones which have not yet been fully implemented. In order to deliver the vast amount of measures foreseen in the education package, adequate funding should be ensured for all educational sectors and all levels, and should also include investment in the professional development of teachers and educators. A stronger focus on equity will ensure that the social inclusion dimension of the package truly contributes to closing existing gaps in education and training across Europe, while validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning are an imperative to give value and visibility to all learning irrespective of the environment where it takes place, especially for learners with a low level of or an adverse experience with formal education. Last but not least, cross-sectoral cooperation as well as the meaningful involvement of civil society will support the implementation of the package and increase its outreach, especially to more marginalised learners. Research can serve to guarantee that all EU programmes are informed with a holistic lifelong learning approach, for this it should be learner-centred and have a humanistic vision as a tool to address societal challenges rather than a narrow focus on labour market needs for economic growth. Additionally, a sustainable and more social Europe for all, leaving no one behind, requires political commitment and long-term vision to make lifelong learning possible. Our education systems need to be modernised while keeping their universal value. Maybe of these key messages were part of the outcomes of European Education Training and Youth Forum' Civil Society Day 2016<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> European Parliament Report on follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0176\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2016-0176_EN.html?redirect)

<sup>13</sup> LLLP Statement, September 2017, [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LLLP-Position\\_Future-of-Europe.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/LLLP-Position_Future-of-Europe.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> European Education Training and Youth Forum' Civil Society Day, 2016 outcomes: [http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CS-Day-19-Oct\\_Outcomes.pdf](http://lllplatform.eu/lll/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/CS-Day-19-Oct_Outcomes.pdf)

Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education is ready to support such a strong vision, provided the funding is made available for it and we look forward to being part of the Steering Board of the European Education Area to represent the education and training stakeholders. Overall, we hope to see the EEA Communication's oversight of the key role played by EU CSOs and NGOs addressed.

**For more information, read some of our members' reactions**

- DARE Network Position Paper Digital Transformation as Part of Digital Education. Recognize the Systemic Relevance of Civic Education [here](#)
- DLearn Digital Education in Europe [here](#)
- European Association for the Education of Adults Statement: Where are the Adults? A European Education Area requires a holistic vision of Lifelong Learning! [Here](#)
- EURASHE Research Area Contribution [here](#)
- OBESSU Achieving the European Education Area by 2025: A great ambition that requires substantial funds [here](#)
- SOLIDAR Foundation Reaction: European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan - First hesitant steps towards inclusive education [here](#)

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*The [Lifelong Learning Platform](#) (LLL-P) is an umbrella organisation that gathers over 40 European networks active in the field of education and training, coming from all EU Member States and beyond. Currently these organisations represent more than 50 000 educational institutions covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Established in 2005, LLL-P promotes a vision of lifelong learning based on equity, social cohesion, active citizenship and personal development. The Platform works as a space for knowledge exchange between its member networks and uses their expertise to discuss and feed in EU policy-making, making sure that European citizens have their voice heard. In that sense LLLP contributes to a better understanding and dialogue between the grassroots level and European institutions.*