

Adapting European education systems to meet society's challenges in an ever changing world

Following its "[Communication on improving and modernising education](#)" (7 December 2016), the European Commission (EC) launched a new Youth initiative on schools and higher education named "[Strategy for high quality, inclusive, and future-oriented education](#)" on 30 May 2017. The package comprises two renewed EU agendas, one is about modernising education in [schools](#) and the other in [higher education](#). Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL) positively welcomes the initiatives¹ and would like to express its views on the **importance of providing the necessary means for the design of new education systems in Europe**, and the improvement of education's ability to **meet societal challenges**. LLLP is very positive about the emphasis given to early childhood education, investment in continued education of teachers, promotion of the cooperation among different stakeholders, improving formal education institutions' governance (e.g. 'whole-school approach'), and synergies with research and innovation. However, the Platform is **less convinced about the relevance of the [graduate tracking](#) specific measure**, because it risks increasing the business-oriented purpose of educational institutions, and could lead to rating higher education institutions, which creates competition between them instead of fostering equality, cooperation and mutual improvement.

Mutations of the world, regarding work, skills demand and societies, have never been changing so rapidly, therefore **urging Member States to reform and adapt their education system to this new reality**. To establish a **society of true equal opportunities**², it is **necessary to make curricula and teaching practices more flexible, innovative, and holistic** by taking stock of the many best practices that have been highlighted in the past years by EU networks and education stakeholders.

That said, LLLP wants to recall that **education is a common good**, and should remain a key instrument to promote public interest by targeting investment to **reduce private and public costs of "non-education" in many fields** such as preventing violence, improving health through sport and well-being promotion, raising awareness on climate change, and guaranteeing social peace in increasingly diverse societies. With regard to that perspective, education reforms should not only aim to transmit tomorrow's set of skills, competences and knowledge for young people to access the labour market, but also **enhance the ability**

¹ Which is addressing the need to ensure the **quality education for all**, thus reflecting the Platform's position overall, as expressed in the [Manifesto on Building the Future of Learning](#) (2015).

² Brown Phillip, "The Opportunity Trap: education and employment in a global economy" (2003), Cardiff University, Wales <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/erj.2003.2.1.4>

of learners to respond to urgent societal issues that are affecting the everyday lives of European citizens. That is why, as stressed in our [previous statement](#), **LLL encourages the Commission to develop a more comprehensive approach on what is a “quality education”**, therefore, not only to rely solely on limited analysis of statistics³. It is crucial that learners of all ages are recognized and consulted as stakeholders, from school students to adult education organisations.

The transition from one education level to another and the cooperation between different education providers in both formal and non-formal settings requires particular attention in the announced EC strategy. We welcome the priority action to build inclusive and connected higher education systems and encourage schools to develop better links and cooperation with higher education in the field of STEM, but such cooperation could be encouraged more, especially in the school communication. Furthermore, LLLP believes the focus on STEM is **restrictive to the wider purpose of education and neglects the importance and relevance of social science and humanities**. Therefore, LLLP calls for a more holistic approach to education and lifelong learning that lies in partnerships and flexible pathways that go beyond a single education level and particular field of study.

In response to the two EC initiatives, and more generally to EU and Member States’ policies, LLLP identified three transversal priorities for schools and higher education:

A better integrated lifelong learning approach

The name of the initiatives (“youth initiatives”) is sending a wrong message and seems to be only targeting young people whereas formal education systems increasingly receive adult learners. It is regrettable that “adults” are barely mentioned in the higher education communication, while higher education can play a key role in lifelong learning at all ages, and also to update the skills, competences and knowledge of employed and unemployed people.

Although the focus of the Communication is on schools and higher education, **cooperation and links between formal, non-formal and informal learning** have not been sufficiently addressed, as underlined in the 2012 Council conclusions⁴ on “partnership and flexible pathways for lifelong skills development”. Despite the demonstration of openness to “new forms of cooperation”, LLLP regrets that **links with other forms of formal education, schools in particular**, are only mentioned in the higher education communication, hence reflecting **a lack of consistency between the two documents. Cross-sectoral cooperation is key for developing a comprehensive recognition of learning outside formal education**

³ The PISA test for instance only focuses on “hard skills” such as competences in science, literacy and maths. In addition, it doesn’t give a fully comprehensive explanation on cultural and local causes of EU countries’ disparities in terms of quality education for both professional and personal outcomes.

⁴ [Council Conclusions](#) 2012 “Partnership and flexible pathways for lifelong learning skills development” accompanying document Communication from the Commission Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socioeconomic outcomes.

settings. LLLP recalls that only half of EU Member States have established a fully comprehensive lifelong learning strategy⁵.

While LLLP welcomes the support for cooperation between universities and the world of work, this should not be restricted to the business sector only. Moreover, building partnerships between businesses and educational institutions should not be justified solely by the assumption that young people are “not directly employable.” However, **businesses should support young people to pursue training** once they enter the world of work: education is a continuous process that cannot deliver on all needs in the short time that concludes in graduation.

Following the Commission’s recommendations, Member States must **facilitate lifelong learning for educators, teachers and enhance staff mobility through Erasmus+ program.** Specific attention must be given to improve **participatory aspects of teaching** as it has been proven a very good pedagogic practice for learners to acquire knowledge and develop certain transversal skills like communication. This would represent a remarkable shift from teacher-centred education towards **learner-centred teaching.**

The social dimension of education

While it has been largely emphasised that **education is a key vector for reducing socio-economic inequalities and promote social inclusion**⁶, inequalities keep on rising in most EU countries⁷. The foreseen Education Summit in early 2018 on Equity and inclusiveness at school, should be an appropriate time to put the social inclusion priority higher on the agenda. Migrants, and asylum seeker in particular, are largely forgotten in both communications. Their integration in EU education systems and the recognition of their own educational background is a fundamental prerequisite to their full integration into our societies!

Even if there is a clear focus on building more inclusive schools and higher education systems in both papers, the focus on **learners with disadvantaged backgrounds** should be stronger. Given the tendency towards a **substantial drop in the PISA results** for this population, it should be **the priority of EU education systems.** This is especially true in times of crisis where budget cuts in education have **direct consequences on pupils and students’ results.** Recommendations for member states to **improve the inclusion of learners with different countries of origin in classrooms** are absent in the school paper’s “teachers section”, and only mentioned in a footnote in the higher education communication. Also,

⁵ [Commission staff working document](#), accompanying the [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), August 2015.

⁶ Education is a key component of recent EU Declarations: EU Social pillar (April 2017); New skills agenda for Europe (June 2016); Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe (April 2017); Paris and Rome Declarations (March 2017).

⁷ Bonesmo Fredriksen, K., “Income Inequality in the European Union” (2012), OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No. 952, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9bdt47q5zt-en>

schools could play a **bigger role in fostering EU shared values⁸ and active citizenship**: tolerance, multiculturalism, and so on.

LLLp stresses the importance of adopting a **comprehensive approach on entrepreneurship**, making beneficial use of the new [EntreComp](#) framework. Developing social projects inside or outside schools is a great opportunity to acquire those skills and the sought mindset as well as contributing to better links with other learning environments. To this view, **the support of the [Solidarity Corps](#) initiative towards young people in schools and higher education must be a key action** for Member States. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in **social entrepreneurship** which is one way of meeting young people's aspirations for more meaningful jobs. Another way to achieve that is giving the opportunity to pupils and students to learn by designing and undertaking social projects inside or outside school settings, for instance, in local communities as a sound alternative to business-oriented activities. LLLp would prefer the terms "world of work" instead of business word, thus including civil society organisations as job providers and potential partners for schools and higher educations.

Basic hard skills are necessary. So are soft and transversal skills, competences and knowledge.

In order to reduce the gap in basic skills, holistic educational approaches that seek a proper balance between the mental, emotional and physical dimensions of education should be promoted. LLLp therefore stresses the importance for the Commission to ensure Member States will adopt a **holistic definition of learners' needs, i.e including hard and soft skills as well as competences and interdisciplinary knowledge**. Those three aspects should not only cover the abilities for work, but also embrace a broader purpose to pursue personal development of all individuals in their life. Education reforms, especially in higher education systems, therefore need to focus as well on **how to better foster active citizenship, youth empowerment and knowledge about how the EU works and can be beneficial**. It is worth recalling that education cannot tackle socio-economic disparities on its own, **as synergies with complementary social and employment policies are a prerequisite for a more sustainable solution**.

There is a **strong focus on PISA test results** to show the different performance of EU education systems. We understand that the availability of such quantitative data makes it easier to compare them. But LLLp regrets the focus given to "basic competences" (STEM, etc) rather than to use data **on more qualitative issues, e.g. well-being indicators** (like in 'quality assurance' paragraph of the school communication). The "performance-based" approach is restrictive and includes the risk of undermining the education institutions' broader purpose of personal fulfillment. Despite the need for "hard skills", **economics cannot dictate the direction of (higher) education**. Namely, initiatives such as a **system-level graduate tracking can be problematic** as they can result in higher education programmes and curricula being based on instrumentalised educational outcomes, like wages or employment levels of graduates. Some Member States already have their own tracking system, so it could be a loss of money to create a new one which has been used in most cases to justify austerity measures in humanities and social science curricula.

⁸ [European Parliament Resolution](#) of 19 January 2016 on "The role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education in promoting EU fundamental values"; [Council paper](#) on The contribution of education and training to social cohesion and the fostering of common European values in the context of the European Semester 2017 (February 2017); [CULT Committee study](#) on "Teaching common values in Europe" (2017)

Education must enhance [key competences](#), skills and attitudes valuable to thrive in life after graduation e.g. teamwork and project-based learning. This new set of skills not only aim to increase employability, but also to **improve the ability of future adults to create their own jobs individually and collectively**. Action-learning, experience-based learning are alternative ways of learning that in many cases can increase the ability to retain knowledge and are more helpful to develop practical skills rather than expertise in a specific subject. Particular attention ought to be given to the development of transversal skills, as employers value them more and more and because they are also helpful in out of work contexts. LLLP is therefore encouraging actions as specified in the EC Communications: projects to assess creativity, problem-solving, collaboration⁹ and critical thinking. Policy-makers need to be given the adequate support and training for understanding the overall dimension of those skills.

To conclude, the cornerstone for improving and modernising education systems is **the availability and efficient allocation of funding and coordinated governance**. The Commission acknowledges this too little in its working documents, and it is not stressed enough that resources in education should not only be focusing on performance, but also on **inclusiveness for individual learners with disadvantaged backgrounds and for the integration of refugees**. Furthermore, it does not encourage enough, if at all, the importance of consulting and involving different stakeholders in this process, in particular civil society organisations.

In view of the high-level Education Summit which will be hosted by the Commission in January 2018, LLLP highly encourages Member States to take a significant step forward in building the education, training and lifelong learning systems that will take learners into a positive future of Europe. While respecting the principle of subsidiarity, we nevertheless believe that the EU makes a highly valuable contribution to European cooperation in the field of education given its unique position to facilitate the exchange of good practices and peer learning between Member States.



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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 LLL-P contributes to a better understanding and dialogue between the grassroots level and European institutions.

⁹ Report of the High Level Group, *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions*, European Commission, June 2013



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