

POSITION PAPER

A reaction to the public consultation on the Europe 2020-strategy

# Executive Summary

Education and training play a crucial role in the reinforcement of societal innovation and of social cohesion. Education and training are key for a sustainable employment and social policy.

* Enhance stakeholder participation. At a European level, structural dialogue with stakeholders is being reinforced. This presupposes more transparency on the profile of experts, and on the representativeness of stakeholder organizations that are being consulted by the European Commission.
* Reinforce the social dimension, and give more impetus for an equal opportunities policy in education;
* Reinforce attention for the learner;
* Enhance coherence and transparency among the different processes and the field of application on different education levels and types;
* Advance a modest set of benchmarks that are well contextualized and explained. The development of a benchmark in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy related to participation in lifelong learning (by adults) and to participation in qualifying vocational education and training;
* Subsidiarity: European policy leaves room for broad ‘Bildung’ concepts and for policy that takes into account the national and regional characteristics and cultural tradition;
* Room for implementation is missing in the educational policy processes of the EU;

# A balanced education policy as a result of European collaboration and national subsidiarity

EUNEC considers enhanced European cooperation an opportunity for both governments and stakeholders to better understand common challenges and to learn from another. It offers platforms for common reflection and developing effective and innovative general approaches for these problems. But for EUNEC this collaboration should not become a mainstraiming policy line that neglects the autonomy of member states to define appropriate solutions and national policy lines. The subsidiarity between European and national policies is a core principle not to be changed.

A second concern is the respect of both European and national policy makers for the autonomy, the professionalism en the local development of a school and of a school team (in this respect this point is further developed in point 4.4).

European policy should give space to national and regional policy to stimulate a broad ‘Bildung” concept.

The vision of the EU on education and training remains strongly utilitarian. Education and training are part of a social and labour market policy. Education and training are seen as an actor to reach societal objectives.

EUNEC welcomes this attention for the societal functions of education and training, under the condition that the labour market focus is not the only one. Besides the economic and societal impact, education has its own mission, namely the development of youngsters and adults in a broad emancipatory and humanistic perspective. The concept of ‘Bildung’ should not be subordinated to the economic and societal benefits of education and training. Critical thinking, creativity and artistic development, social and civic competences are crucial in every pedagogical concept.

Education and training must indeed create the conditions to enable the young, the men and the women, to develop and enrich their personality, as well as to assume their integration in society in a critical and creative way. Education and training are responsible for offering to all the necessary tools for an active participation to life in the society. They must also contribute to the social integration of the users by assuring their social and economic independence, by pursuing an objective of equal opportunities for all, but also in respecting the specific needs of the individuals. Consequently, access to employment is a mission of education and training, but it is one among others.

EUNEC is not pleading for European initiatives in the field of the broader mission of education and training. EUNEC is pleading for a European policy that gives room to the member states to develop their own ‘Bildung’ concept. In this sense, the societal questions advanced by Europe need to be complementary to the national and regional education policy.

# Need for more structured stakeholders participation

Effective involvement of stakeholders is needed to achieve the objectives at European and national level.

EUNEC is convinced that successful innovation cannot take place at policy level only. Initiating effective change in school and classroom practice needs therefore a balanced innovation strategy paying attention to the micro, meso and macro level. The necessity for a sense of ownership at school level implies that changes cannot be realized on an exclusively top-down basis. In education policies, platforms such as education councils show interesting models of involvement of stakeholders in the conceptualization, implementation and evaluation of education policies [[1]](#footnote-1).

This participation deals with all aspects of the policy cycle: from the design of the concepts to implementation and evaluation. Stakeholders thus have to be involved at different levels. A first level is the level of timely and correct information. Recent initiatives lead to improvement in this respect, but there is room for improvement. A second level is the level of involving stakeholders in the decisions on priorities and implementation.

Until now, EUNEC has been involved in the Europe 2020-strategy through the participation of the network in the yearly stakeholders meeting, through the participation in several European consultations and through the participation in the EU stakeholder group on early school leaving. However, if civil society organizations really want to improve the implementation of Europe 2020 in the upcoming period, they will have to be consulted at an early stage about new policies. In this respect, EUNEC regrets that the mandate of the thematic working groups has come to an end, and that the role of stakeholders in the new generation of working groups is not clear. EUNEC insists on the importance of close contacts between the institutions and the stakeholders. A possible way of involving stakeholders in the conceptualization and implementation of policies would be the organization of back-to-back meetings of the new thematic working groups and stakeholders working groups.

Finally, EUNEC hopes that the EU will foresee enhanced funding opportunities for peer learning activities and for projects of EU-wide networks in order to improve stakeholder involvement in a post-crisis growth strategy for Europe, with increased awareness, support and better implementation in the different countries.

# Education and training: a core process in the renewed European policy

The integration of education benchmarks in the broad Europe 2020 strategy is a strong sign that education and training deliver an important contribution to societal development in Europe. It is a way of recognizing, by the EU, that education and training play a crucial role in the reinforcement of societal innovation and of social cohesion. Education and training are key for a sustainable employment and social policy. Within the governance mechanisms, the EU urges member states to guarantee the qualification levels of the citizens, through high quality education and training.

This sign is very meaningful for national and regional governments. However, the following additional points of attention are crucial.

## A stronger focus on the social dimension of education and training through an equal opportunities policy

EUNEC welcomes the fact that the perspective of European education and training policy has broadened. Social cohesion and sustainability are now more at the forefront. We see that equal opportunities in education, and more specifically the integration of disadvantaged groups within education, are implicitly present in European education policy lines. But it is not yet a formal point of cooperation among member states. EUNEC would like to see this attention for the most vulnerable groups go beyond rhetoric; we ask the EU to send effective impulses to the equal opportunities policies of the member states.

## European education and training policy gives too little attention to the perspective and the rights of the learner

European education and training policy focuses on economic and societal expectations towards education and training. EUNEC states that education and training policy has to value more the perspective of the learner. In European documents, issues such as participation of the learners, wellbeing and motivation are hardly present.

The ECOSOC treaty as well as the United Nations treaty on the rights of the child insist on the right of every learner to high quality education and development, the development of values and identity, respect for human rights, protection and human dignity, active and passive education freedom (Art. 28, 29 and 30). European policy frameworks should put more emphasis on this point of view and take it into account in their policy work.

## Coherence between different European policy frameworks

EUNEC is pleading for clear coherence between the different European policy frameworks en transparency on the objectives of these frameworks. Some policy lines are put in the picture, and disappear after a while from the policy agenda. In this respect, EUNEC refers to the flagship initiatives such as ‘New skills for new jobs’.

A stronger transparency of the objectives of the policy lines for compulsory education, for lifelong learning, for higher education and for vocational education and training is needed. The field of implementation of the reference frameworks (for instance EQG, quality insurance) is often not clear. Some policy lines from the Copenhagen process, such as the qualification framework can be applied in a field that is larger than vocational education and training, but this is not clear or explicit.

In this respect, EUNEC asks that, given the reorganization within the European Commission and the European administration, there is more attention for the coherence of policies related to the different education levels.

## What about educational benchmarks and indicators, in the context of the country-specific recommendations?

EUNEC welcomes the fact that the effects of national or regional policy are followed up at European level.

EUNEC finds it useful to break down the EU-level targets into national targets and educational goals that also take into account the national context and the national common understanding. EUNEC welcomes the European benchmarks, but they should not lead to a convergence of education and training systems. Uniformity cannot be the objective: according to the principle of subsidiarity, considerations at local, regional and national level remain decisive factors.

EUNEC pleads for realism in the objectives set by the member states. The fact that member states define ambitious objectives has its value, but for some benchmarks it is clear that they were already reached when formulated, whilst other benchmarks proved to be unrealistic from the start. EUNEC prefers a modest set of benchmarks and indicators.

For EUNEC, the benchmarks are one of more policy tools. They have to be read in a specific policy and societal context. They cannot be the only impact measurement of good policy. They do not reflect the complexity of the educational reality. Some examples: member states can implement successful reforms that have no immediate measurable impact; indicators should not lead to less attention for competences, attitudes, values, reflection and metacognition. The relevance of indicators has to be judged in the specific geographic and historical-cultural context. EUNEC states that the country-specific recommendations should embrace this. European indicators and benchmarks should never lead to an accountability pressure with local schools. Schools have to work on horizontal and internal accountability in the framework of the quality policy of the school.

Given the fact that lifelong learning remains a challenge in all member states, and given the worrying trends that are demonstrated by PIAAC, EUNEC suggests to add a benchmark related to participation in lifelong learning (by adults) and to participation in qualifying vocational education and training to the two existing benchmarks within Europe 2020 (early school leaving and higher education attainment). This would emphasis the importance of vocational pathways to enhance the qualification levels. It would also give incentives to the member states and to the social partners to invest in vocational education and training and in lifelong learning of the workers. It would be good to search for one or two benchmarks that reflect these efforts.

EUNEC regrets that the Europe 2020 strategy does not cover other important areas of cooperation, such as the impact of early childhood education, of lifelong learning and of informal and non-formal learning. The need for sufficient and highly qualified teachers should also be part of the education policy of the EU. The current targets do not cover other challenges, such as the need to ensure sustainable investments in education and training, the need to ensure stakeholder involvement. EUNEC does not plead for targets and benchmarks in all these specific areas, but insists on an inclusive and coherent education and training strategy, integration lifelong learning, the Bologna process, the Copenhagen process to assist Member States to reach the Europe 2020 goals.

## Implementation: a missing element in European innovative thinking

EUNEC is convinced that the member states have to underpin more strongly their education policy, and that they need to create broader support. Too often policy makers – at a European level as well as at national/regional level - assume that new policy plans and guidelines automatically lead to innovation at school level. This vision is simplistic, and does not take into account educational insights on innovation.

Literature on educational innovation shows that policy makers have to leave room for the professional translation of innovation in the practice and in the professional culture of the individuals and the teams that work in education. European policy texts should pay more attention to the basic conditions for implementation of innovation in education.

To implement change with real impact in the classroom, asks for a continuous process of change for several years. And yet the European Commission asks the member states to report on a yearly (or two yearly) basis on the effects of the innovations. This might create an overload of reporting obligations, that are not accompanied by a well-structured evaluation process at national level. EUNEC is asking for a meaningful phasing of the reporting processes, which would make it possible to report on real change.

1. Balancing expertise, societal input and political control in the production of policy advice’. Brans Marleen, Van Damme Jan & Gaskell Jonathan (2010). <http://www.eunec.eu/publication/education-councils-eu-balancing-expertise-societal-advice-and-political-control> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)