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Key competences and vulnerable groups

EUNEC statements

1 Introduction

In its statements on Transparency of Qualifications (October 2004), EUNEC emphasised the importance of creating more chances in education and training for the most vulnerable groups in society. The knowledge society risks becoming a dual society. Sociological research points out that the level of education and training (and the corresponding level of qualification) is very significant for a person's place in society. Considering the importance of knowledge and a high level of competences, there is a real danger that low or unqualified persons will not be able to work in knowledge-based companies. Without targeted efforts to enhance their competences, they are threatened to get marginalised. In its comments on these statements, EUNEC asked for a clear inventory of basic or key competences, as a very important first step in this process¹.

Therefore, EUNEC is pleased with the proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning. The proposal aims to support the Member States in their efforts to adapt their basic education and training systems, their adult education and training provisions and the entire lifelong learning system to the new challenges of the knowledge society, by providing a reference tool on key competences. The reference framework describes eight key competences. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment. By the end of initial education and training young people should have developed the key competences to a level that equips them for adult life and they should be further developed, maintained and updated as part of lifelong learning. These competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. EUNEC considers the work of the Commission as a fundamental contribution to the realisation of the Lisbon objectives for a knowledge-based society.

¹ EUNEC. Transparency of Qualifications. A European Process. A Challenge for Citizenship and Social Cohesion. March 2005. p. 172.

Nevertheless, EUNEC wants to make some critical remarks on this proposal and to put forward some suggestions for a real implementation of this proposal, especially targeted on education and training of the most vulnerable groups in society. Two of the key principles should be that:

- no one should be left behind, and
- that each country, sector, locality should set up objectives and targets that are realistic.

2 Remarks and suggestions

2.1 Nature of the framework

The framework is a reference to the learning domains relevant for all learning pathways in order to achieve the key competences. These key competences are described in a general way, not in detail. They are no school subjects. It is the competence of each country/region to define the relationship between the key competences and the core curricula, taking into account the diversity of the countries and regions. By using peer reviews the countries/regions can create a common view on the key competences. The key competences offer a common platform relevant for all learning pathways and establish a minimal coherence between general education and VET.

2.2 Objectives

The perspective used by the document is that of the individual learner. This is useful but the framework also has an added value to the building of a European society. A common platform/a common link between learning pathways offers a basis for common understanding and social cohesion as the minimal shared values of all citizens. This societal perspective should be a criterion to judge on the proposals.

EUNEC is particularly concerned about the role of education and training in the personal development of learners. From an educational point of view, key competences have to equip young persons with knowledge, skills and attitudes to become critical and mature citizens, who are able to take responsibility for their personal life and in society and who can find their place in the labour market. EUNEC explicitly wants to emphasise the link between the key competences and the notion of active citizenship. The competences that young people acquire in education and training have to guarantee, next to their integration in the labour market, that they can take up social responsibilities. Especially in vocational education and training, we may not forget this emphasis on personal development and citizenship. Therefore, a description of key competences has to search for a balance between economic and general oriented objectives. EUNEC recognises that the proposal on key competences attempts to reflect this fragile balance. However we consider that in practice the framework emphasises the short term needs of the labour market and the society at the expense of personal fulfilment.

2.3 Definition of the concept 'competence'

EUNEC states that there is a long-standing debate on scientific and practical definitions of the concept 'competence'. A clear and workable definition is absolutely necessary. EUNEC suggests using the definition of competence as it is formulated in the document on the

EQF: 'Competence is the proven ability to perform a task or operation to a predetermined standard. In order to be competent it is necessary to possess different types of competences in work or study situations. These include: cognitive competence, functional or methodological competence, personal competence and ethical competence. The content and the definition of key competences can only be specified for a limited period of time. In our rapidly changing society, the demand for competences is constantly changing. It is important that key competences are defined in such a way that they can keep up with change. Therefore it is important that the authorities and all the stakeholders permanently monitor the needs for competences.

2.4 Target groups

Everybody has to acquire the key competences in initial/compulsory education. If not, the government must make it possible to acquire them in second chance education. This means taking learning to the learner and experimenting successfully with non-traditional forms of provision such as informal and e-learning settings. Some adults didn't acquire the key competences during their education and training period, therefore, we plead for a well equipped second chance education.

The rapidly changing needs of the knowledge society also cause the need of a rapid adaptation of competences in education and training systems. A clear and coherent lifelong learning strategy is necessary in all countries/regions.

2.5 The eight key competences

The European Reference Framework of key competences for lifelong learning sets out eight key competences. Each competence is defined and is linked with a description of essential knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is clear that many of the competences overlap and interlock: aspects essential to one domain will support competence in another. There are also a number of themes which play a role in all eight key competences: critical thinking, creativity, initiative taking, problem solving, risk assessment, decision taking and managing feelings.

In general we accept the description of the key competences, but their content must be clearly defined for all actors. However, we also want to repeat here our comment under the section 2.2 Objectives: in practice the framework emphasises the short term needs of the labour market and the society at the expense of personal fulfilment.

2.6 Relationship with other 'European' instruments

It is necessary to clarify the place of key competences in the global framework of Education and Training 2010 (EQF, credit transfer systems, guidance, validation of non-formal learning...). EUNEC pleads for coherence between all the European tools.

2.7 Vulnerable groups

EUNEC wants to make an important general remark. The implementation of these key competences in the education and training system of a country/region will imply serious efforts of these countries/regions. When we accept lifelong learning as a right for vulnerable groups, member states will have to provide adjusted learning strategies for

these vulnerable groups. Every country/region has to decide what the vulnerable groups are in the context of its society.

Equal opportunities are an important concern of EUNEC. All citizens have to get large opportunities to develop competences. Education systems do not only have to guarantee the equal access of young persons and adults but they also have to design instructional processes in a way that even people with learning difficulties can acquire the necessary competences. The development of key competences is of fundamental importance for everyone. Therefore certain vulnerable groups in society should be given special attention and support when designing action programmes at national or regional level.

For EUNEC vulnerable groups endangered in their participation in a knowledge society are much broader than elderly persons. Persons at risk can be found among

- early school leavers,
- migrants,
- people with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills,
- learners with special needs,
- people suffering from social deprivation who lack of participation rights in society,
- prisoners and ex-prisoners,
- people who don't have access to the educational system,
- people who aren't convinced of the importance of lifelong learning for their personnel development,
- ...

Public agencies should develop clear criteria for identifying groups and individuals who lack proficiency of key competences. It is important to ensure that these groups can reach an acceptable level of key competences in order to be able to live and function in a knowledge society.

Starting from the principle of subsidiarity, it is important that countries/regions design their own action programmes for their own vulnerable groups. Relevant international or European data, statistics and benchmarks can be useful for discovering the missing links of national/regional education systems. The starting point of these action programmes should be the right on good education and training of each individual in the society. They have to guarantee the inclusion of vulnerable groups and people with learning difficulties in education and training and in the whole society. It is also important to be aware of the complexity of the learning process. The influence of external and personality development factors (such as family socialisation) has also to be kept in mind.

2.8 Learning strategies: lifelong learning as a right for vulnerable groups

Pre and early school programs for children deserve more attention in the campaign to raise competency levels of people at risk. Children of vulnerable groups should get support/guidance to participate in education. They should be prepared to make an informed choice. They should be able to develop their own education and learning as a 'project for life' under construction.

Important deciding factors for the success of this strategy include:

- selective targeting of most underprivileged children;
- close involvement of the parents;
- an integrated approach;
- a sustained effort in the primary and secondary school.

Creating equal opportunities is more than creating equal access. In compulsory education learning rights must be reinforced. This includes:

- the right of admission to a school of one's choice,
- a pedagogy of success instead of defeat,
- the right to differentiated learning strategies,
- the expansion of programmes in non formal learning environments;

We are convinced that, when we implement this proposal in practice, we will have to accept different mastery levels. The individual abilities must be the criterion of the level, not the group. For some individuals we will have to accept levels according to their best potentials of key competences: an acceptable level of literacy and numeracy and of life skills. Adapted lifelong learning strategies should ensure that these elementary competences can be brought to a higher level through their further life.

2.9 Critical conditions

The concrete implementation of this proposal will have large implications for the member states. Hereby we think on the influence on teacher training and teacher competences. A teacher has to be able to deal with diversity, and that is more than just a pedagogical problem. Informal learning has to be taken into account.

A dialogue with the civil society at large and the exchange between formal and informal learning environments are also critical factors for success.

2.10 Implementation

The development of key competences is strongly influenced by economic developments and the developments on the labour market. Nevertheless, the education field must have the possibility to take part in the debate on the content and the implementation of these key competences. A strategy for implementation has to be developed in a common dialogue with all the stakeholders (social partners, providers, teachers and trainers, pupils and learners, parents). The social partners have to report the needs of the sectors to the education and training field. But the educational sector also has to play a very active role in the debate. The education field is familiar with the interests and the needs of their pupils and students. They can balance the 'learnable' competences and the personal characteristics. The education sector has to convert these key competences in clearly profiled course programmes. This is a guarantee for a broad concept of education and training.

It is extremely important to have an ongoing exchange of views on this matter. Examples of good practice, peer learning activities, analysis of failures in the education field throughout Europe should be supported actively.