

Position Paper

UEAPME position paper on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training 2020

UEAPME preliminary remarks:

The updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training was published by the European Commission on 16 December 2008 and has been endorsed by the Education Council Conclusions on 12 May 2009.

This is the first formal revision of the original “Education and Training 2010 work programme”, including three joint progress reports of the Council and the Commission on its implementation to date. It aims to give concrete strategic objectives for education and training systems in Europe up to 2020. Tangible progress has been achieved since 2002¹, but certain serious shortcomings still need to be addressed at national level in order to speed-up implementation of the benchmarks and reforms more widely.

Introduction

This European framework has a fundamental role to play in contributing to education and training within the current Lisbon Strategy and renewed Social Agenda and the post Lisbon Strategy.

Major ongoing challenges exist, such as globalisation, the demographical situation and a shift towards the knowledge economy, as well as more recent ones, such as migration, sustainability and in particular related to the economic, social and financial crises and implementing flexicurity, which all require specific attention. This is particularly relevant in the present difficult economic climate, where efficient educational investments need to be upheld and strengthened to tackle immediate problems and create future prosperity and growth more than ever.

At the same time labour market demands need to be anticipated in a more concrete manner analysing how sectors and industries change, as referred to in the “New Skills for New Jobs”² initiative. Employers require a well qualified labour force according to company needs, but which is often hard to come by. Therefore UEAPME underlines that education and training planning and in particular

¹ Official Journal of the European Communities (2002/C 142/01)

² See UEAPME position paper on New Skills for New Jobs

http://www.ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/090225_pp_new_skills_for_new_jobs.pdf

VET has to be made more responsive to labour market needs in order to achieve a better match of supply and demand. .

Part 1 – Where do we stand?

Despite the European Union’s limited competence in the field of education and training, it is clear the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) plays a significant role in helping Member States to improve their national systems and set up effective working methods. At a first glance there has been overall progress in the EU towards the five essential benchmarks agreed for 2010. Notably these benchmarks aim at raising the number of maths, science and technology (MST) graduates, increasing lifelong learning participation and upper secondary attainment, as well as reducing low achievement in reading and the number of early school leavers.

However, details reveal great disparities between Member States, necessitating stronger national implementation. Besides from positive developments regarding one benchmark on the number of MST graduates, which has been achieved, progress regarding the other four benchmarks remains largely unsatisfactory, with one of which the situation has even deteriorated. This is of great concern, as all five benchmarks are a crucial foundation to ensure success of the individual on the labour market and respond to the needs of the labour market and economy.

Europe needs to take a more self-critical approach when comparing its education and training systems internationally and in order to steer future European policies. Currently Europe overall performs well. Nevertheless, it is surprising that there are no statistics mentioned specifically for India and China, whose economies are expanding rapidly and who will soon be producing the highest number of graduates and therefore posing a more acute threat to Europe’s competitiveness.

Part 2 - Long-term strategic challenges and immediate priorities: Raising skills levels through lifelong learning

UEAPME endorses the four long-term strategic challenges that have been outlined for the period up to 2020, namely:

- Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality
- Improving the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes
- Promoting equity and active citizenship
- Enhancing innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training

On a technical level these four overarching priorities are complemented by short-term priority cycles, covering a period of initially three years and subsequently to two year intervals.

Concerning content, the framework is decisively taking a new coordinated approach aiming at merging policies across the different education and training systems. UEAPME has in the past particularly called for putting VET and higher education on an equal footing and increasing

permeability between the two. Ensuring a parity of esteem between VET and higher education is one key element to facilitate and improve this permeability of different learning pathways, which is essential in a lifelong learning perspective.

UEAPME appreciates that the central role of VET and the Copenhagen process which were not mentioned in the Commission's communication has been explicitly addressed in the Education Council Conclusions. This is despite the Cedefop calculations that there is an increasing demand for VET up to 2020 in the medium skills range. Therefore UEAPME would like to reemphasise the following two overriding priorities, which need to be fully highlighted as key to the new framework:

1. Enhancing the attractiveness and quality of Vocational Education and Training
2. Reducing the number of early school leavers

On the individual priorities

1. Make lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality

UEAPME stresses the central role accorded to the strategic priority on lifelong learning and mobility, which represents an indispensable innovation since the last work programme.

Lifelong learning strategies covering all age groups and all learning contexts are even more important today, as for many Europeans the traditional life course of finishing education, moving into employment, raising a family and retiring, no longer applies. Increasingly, people swap periods of education and work, or combine paid work with raising children or caring for elderly relatives without forgetting more numerous transition periods during the working life.

Continuous training and up-skilling play a vital role in accessing and returning to the labour market, to remain and progress, as well as contributing to a smooth transition between jobs. As recently agreed by the Education Council³ guidance needs to be firmly anchored as part of lifelong learning strategies to help individuals adapt to the continuous and rapid technological developments, restructuring and globalisation in general.

It has been rightly emphasised that structures helping to validate a person's skills acquired over a lifetime in a formal, non-formal or informal setting are absolutely essential. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is crucial representing a paradigm shift towards validating learning outcomes, as opposed to learning input which relies solely on certificates or qualifications and does not always sufficiently reflect the individual's competences.

Within vocational training the development of an European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) enabling the transfer of credit and encouraging mobility, modularity and flexibility is of major importance. In particular regarding these two important EU instruments, EQF and ECVET, more work will need to be done to set-up an effective implementation at national level.

³ See Education Council conclusions November 2008.

With regard to expanding learner mobility, Crafts and SME entrepreneurs strongly value mobile employees who have gained new skills and who have proven their adaptability. This learner mobility can consist of different forms, whether sectoral, occupational or of a geographical nature within a country or cross-border context, all of which help to increase employability.

UEAPME has previously already strongly advocated the importance of adding a priority on increasing and facilitating learning mobility within VET, in the context of the Commission and Council joint progress reports⁴. The learning mobility for young persons and notably those in IVET should be increased, both quantitatively and qualitatively, with the ultimate aim of mobility becoming the rule and not remaining an exception⁵.

2. Improve the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes

The acquisition of key competences by all is clearly decisive in order to reach the European Union's aim of fostering a knowledge society and increasing employability. Whilst UEAPME believes that some key competences are fundamental in order to develop the others, e.g. basic skills in reading, mathematics and science, it is the broad range of solid and transferable skills which makes an employee attractive for an employer.

Regarding more immediate priority themes the issue of qualitative education and training systems is very important within wider governance and funding. Education and training systems need to be continuously adapted. More widely, quality has to be improved at all levels, including vocational training, general education and higher education in order to provide a competent workforce. Regarding VET, the recently adopted European Quality Assurance Framework (EQARF) should contribute to improving quality within vocational training.

Nonetheless, any discussion on the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes cannot be decoupled from a certain individual responsibility of a worker in terms of regularly updating skills to improve the chances of success on the labour market. This would help less qualified individuals to become more attractive for employers. Here it is crucial to ensure greater awareness raising of the need for up-skilling or retraining, even if there are no general agreements yet on how to effectively measure "employability" in practice.

3. Promote equity and active citizenship

Education and training systems need to be not only accessible but also efficient for all citizens throughout a life cycle, therefore ensuring equity. Especially an incomplete secondary education caused by early school drop out or insufficient attainment at secondary level puts young people at a strong disadvantage in later life. The risks and costs of social exclusion are known and in many Member States the social-economic background still plays a too dominant role for achieving success.

⁴ UEAPME position paper on the Draft 2008 joint progress report on the implementation of the "Education and Training 2010 work programme" http://www.ueapme.com/docs/pos_papers/2007/071203_pp_Ed-Tr_2008.pdf

⁵ EC Green Paper on Promoting the learning mobility of young people, COM(2009) 329/4

As previously stated, Crafts and SMEs employers need people with a solid educational basis, including apprentices, as they are the largest provider of Initial Vocational Education and Training. It is clear that stronger prevention mechanisms need to be put into place to avoid early school drop out, as well as structures to facilitate re-accessing education and training for those affected.

4. Enhance innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training

This fourth long-term challenge is a new strategic priority, which speaks for itself, as Europe evidently needs to boost its capacity for creativity and innovation for both social and economic reasons. In an increasingly culturally diverse and knowledge-based society people need to have skills and competences that enable them to adapt creatively and quickly and see change not as a threat, but as an opportunity, as well as be open to new ideas. Here the European Commission's initiative in promoting awareness for innovation and creativity through the European Year of Innovation and Creativity 2009 has been very useful.

It should be noted that the term innovation needs therefore to be used in the widest sense, taking into account the various forms and not be only restricted to R & D. Innovation in SMEs and Crafts occurs at all levels within an enterprise and covers all types. One example for this regards process oriented methods, due to the fact that SMEs are permanently looking for new solutions with suppliers and customers.

UEAPME strongly welcomes the proposal to strengthen innovation and creativity, as well as entrepreneurship through a new benchmark. Entrepreneurship and a sense of initiative needs to be integrated as a pedagogical approach throughout all systems of education and training and at all levels. It needs to start as early as possible in school and be continuously omnipresent, also in later stages in life.

In order to maximise the flow of knowledge, research and innovation partnerships between different institutions and organisations have been rightly identified as taking a crucial place. From an entrepreneurial point of view it is highly important to give Craft and SME businesses the possibility to deepen cooperation with universities, as this helps to enhance the general educational level to reply to lifelong learning needs and create synergies, as well as being of mutual benefit for both sides.

Part 3 – Improved working methods for the future Open Method of Coordination

Updating the benchmarks beyond 2010

UEAPME agrees with the Commission on the need for identifying long-term strategic challenges, whilst at the same time granting indicators, benchmarks and the immediate priorities a certain flexibility to adapt to the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs and emerging challenges. Currently some of the five Education and Training benchmarks, for example raising participation in lifelong learning are also part of the Employment Guidelines in the Lisbon Strategy, thereby creating a strong

link between the two strategies. However, the chosen structure also adds a certain complexity to the framework and UEAPME would like to point out that the right balance needs to be struck by Member States on focusing between the long-term and short-term goals.

There equally needs to be a renewed emphasis for Member States to step up efforts on implementing the five already existing benchmarks, which have been slightly revised before setting out ambitiously on a range of new ones.

UEAPME particularly supports the two following benchmarks:

1. On early leavers from education and training: Broadening the benchmark on early school leavers to include all education and training and that the proportion of early leavers should not lie above 10%. This is a sensible approach to put the emphasis not only on schools and to include vocational training.
2. On early childhood education: A new benchmark on early childhood education setting an aim of at least 95% of children between the age of four and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education. Studies show that these early investments help to ensure an early start in life and qualitative educational outcomes in the most efficient manner, in particular also for disadvantaged children whilst contributing to a better work-life balance regarding labour market participation for both parents concerned.

Concerning the benchmark on higher education to have 40% of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment by 2020, UEAPME is rather sceptical as the target itself appears to be quite high and there is a lack of evidence that this is required for future labour market needs.

Moreover it is unfortunate to use the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) as a measurement tool, which tends to be highly academic and theoretical, when we actually have introduced the EQF in Europe. It should be promoted in its usage in view of the implementation deadlines set for 2010 and 2012.

Mobility:

UEAPME has been disappointed to see that for the first time concrete targets for mobility have been adopted in Higher Education up to 2020 by the Education Council in May 2009⁶, whereas vocational education and training is still lagging behind with a vague formulation stating that “the Commission is invited to study the possibility of extending such a benchmark to include VET and teacher mobility”.

Employability:

It is vital for all of the working age population to maintain employability in view of more frequent labour market transitions throughout the life cycle. Further discussions will be needed to define the appropriate measurement methods for employability. One factor which could be considered is the clear correlation between the percentage of young persons in VET and youth employment.

⁶ See Education Council adoptions on the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up to 2020

On governance and the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)

Regarding the reporting mechanisms, UEAPME emphasises that it is up to Member States themselves to exchange best practice, according to the subsidiarity principle with EU support. Therefore the joint report by the Council and Commission should find the right approach for portraying the situation in individual countries. Member States clearly need to be given a certain amount of room for manoeuvre to introduce national targets according to the European benchmarks outlined.

UEAPME welcomes the decision to link the framework more closely to the Lifelong learning programme, as the lifelong learning programme is a decisive supporting tool for the framework and has a solid financial budget to draw on. In addition, focusing more strongly on peer learning under the new framework programme should provide added support for Member States to facilitate the implementation of reforms more quickly.

Concerning the OMC more widely, it has a challenging monitoring role and needs to be overviewed carefully. Not only do the education and training systems in Member States differ greatly, but there are also a wide range of processes within the field of education and training in Europe, such as the Copenhagen Process, Bologna Process. In order to contribute to strengthening the OMC process, clearly the awareness of the priorities and outputs of the work programme need to be enhanced amongst all stakeholders across the board, including the sectors, with the aim of raising visibility of the OMC at both European, national and regional levels.

Last but not least, UEAPME welcomes the recognition accorded to social partners by the Commission in the complementary role that they have to play in education and training. Nevertheless, at national level there is a need for Member States to involve social partners more actively for the annual national reports. Social partners can contribute significantly to the discussions and to ensuring a better bottom-up approach to help implement the new structures within the national, regional and local context.

Conclusions

Better investing in human resources and reforming education and training systems remains crucial if Europe wants to create growth, prosperity and jobs successfully and face increasingly fierce international competition. In policy terms, the updated strategic framework clearly represents a first step in the right direction beyond 2010, but should be further fine tuned and adapted to the national context and notably linked to the economic, social and employment crisis.

Brussels, 08/10/09

For further information on this position paper, please contact:

Helen Hoffmann
 Adviser Social Affairs
h.hoffmann@ueapme.com