

High Level Group on Education and Training

Riga, 17-18 December 2014

SUMMARY REPORT

The High Level Group on Education and Training (HLG), organized by the Latvian Presidency, brought together senior officials from the Member States (MS) in order to discuss the strategic issues, including the stocktaking process of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and the preparation of the Joint Report 2015. Representatives of the European Commission's DG Education and Culture (DG EAC) and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) and the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union were also present at the meeting.

Plenary sessions, including information points and discussions, as well as parallel working sessions were held, promoting in-depth discussions on strategic issues within the ET 2020 mid-term stocktaking.

Presentations were made by the Latvian Presidency and the incoming Luxembourg Presidency on priorities in the field of education and training.

1. The new Commission and ET 2020

The Commission provided an information on its new internal organization starting from 2015, which concerns DG EAC and DG EMPL, stressing that it will not affect the integrated ET 2020 framework, as good cooperation has already been developed within the working process.

It has been underlined that the new Commission would use the approach of focusing on key issues, being "big on big things and small on small things". The main focus is on growth and jobs. Stakeholders should make sure that education makes great contribution to the EU agenda. It has been pointed out that Vice-presidents play a key role to coordinate and steer the work of project teams on key objectives.

Main issues of the work programme:

- Review of the Europe 2020 strategy;
- An Investment Plan for Europe;
- Digital single market.

The Commission stressed that the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council put forward a strong message on cooperation across policy areas, which requires a more effective collaboration between education and employment, also considering the review of the Europe 2020 strategy. In order to promote better contribution of the ET 2020 to the overall EU strategy, more focused debate at the ministerial level would be needed, which could take place at the May Council 2015. The new Commission decided to present its views on the review of Europe 2020 only at the end of February or beginning of March (the precise date still pending). It is important to ensure that the 2015 draft Joint Report can take into account in full the outcome of the review of Europe 2020 to avoid a situation like in 2009, when the ET 2020 Council Conclusions were adopted before the Europe 2020 Strategy was agreed. Given the new distribution of competences within the Commission, the preparation of the 2015 draft Joint Report will require closer cooperation between DG EAC and DG EMPL to maintain the integrated approach of ET 2020. In consequence, it will not be possible to adopt the draft Joint Report in time for the May Council. The Commission informed on the intention to adopt the draft Joint Report end of July or early September so that the November Council under the Luxembourg Presidency could adopt it.

Council Secretariat emphasized that the work organization regarding the dealing with certain issues within particular Council formation will depend on the Council and the Presidency. In the context of the preparation of the ET 2020 Joint Report, it was pointed out that the new timeline would provide more time for discussions.



During the HLG discussion some MS expressed their concern about the internal changes of the Commission, stressing the need to have a common view on the priorities and promote political monitoring. The new timeline of the ET 2020 Joint Report raised questions on the possible gap between the stocktaking process and the adoption, which could have an impact on its effectiveness. Still, it was noted by the MS, as well as the Latvian Presidency and the incoming Luxembourg Presidency.

2. Education and Training in Europe 2020 and the European Semester

Information on the Annual Growth Survey 2015 was provided by the Commission, emphasizing the structural reforms relevant to education such as Digital single market at the EU level and labour market relevance of skills, upgrading of vocational education and training (VET) and dual systems, broadening access to lifelong learning and prevention of early school leaving at the national level.

Investment Plan for Europe is targeted at restoring confidence in future and growth and jobs. Education is one of the key elements of the investment package. The Commission highlighted four types of illustrative programmes for education within the Investment Plan for Europe: entrepreneurship in universities (HEInnovate); regional university-business hubs; student loans in tertiary education; investment to modernise/expand infrastructure in higher education, VET, schools and early childhood education and care.

The European Semester 2015 started at the end of November 2014 with the economic package: Annual Growth Survey 2015, Draft Joint Employment Report, Alert Mechanism Report 2015, a Communication on the review of Economic Governance and opinions on the budgetary plans of euro-area members. Country-specific analyses are planned in March and the country specific recommendations in June 2015.

The Commission's presentation on the Education and Training Monitor indicated very diversified groups of early school leavers, inequalities in higher education, teacher shortages for students with different background (special needs, social risk, etc.), as well as a need for tracking the graduates and providing access to lifelong learning. It also outlined education policy levers for building growth: teaching profession, education relevance to the needs of the labour market, continued learning.

The Commission recalled the back-to-back meetings of the Employment and the Education Council of December 2014 that called for stronger cooperation between the employment and the education side. Regarding the ET 2020, the Commission underlined the cooperation with the Employment Committee as the logic of following the objectives, providing expertise from the part of education policy. Discussion on cooperation possibilities and practical way to move forward is needed, and the new timing would allow arranging it in a better way, with respect to the country specific recommendations as well.

Within the HLG discussion many MS stressed the necessity for immediate improvement of spending efficiency and quality, as well as development of an inclusive vision, especially regarding the social dimension. It was pointed out that discussions on country specific recommendations need to have a strong national contribution, providing a proper amount of time for reactions. Cooperation with the Employment Committee has been mentioned as an integrated way of working, therefore stressing the need of more concrete plan for working together with the employment sector.

3. ET 2020 Working Groups

The Commission presented the state of play of the ET 2020 Working Groups and an update on the activities:

- Due to the changes in DG EAC and DG EMPL two Working Groups (on Vocational Education and Training and on Adult Learning) will be under the supervision of DG EMPL. In addition, the moderators will be changed in Working Groups on Transversal Skills and on Digital and Online Learning. This should not cause any problems, as the ET 2020 is an integrated process and the mandate for each group is clear.
- As the assistance to MS facing issues identified in country specific recommendations is included in the mandates of the Working Groups, activities were held to ensure that MS could benefit from the practical



experience and good practices of other MS.

- Most ET 2020 Working Groups organized peer learning activities, using clustering approach in order to make it more effective and focusing on good practices in some specific issues.
- There is a complication with the Working Group on Transversal Skills due to its large size, which makes it difficult to prepare and lead discussions. Maybe it would require a change in the mandate, but there is no specific solution for it now.
- Visibility and dissemination has been provided by delivering outputs, as well as updating the webpages. Still, more improvements are needed, promoting wider visibility and stronger dissemination.

Within the HLG discussion, MS pointed out that it is difficult to have a holistic approach to run the Working Groups and it would be necessary to improve the coordination between them. Very positive feedback has been given on the Working Group on Modernisation of Higher Education.

The Commission reminded of the necessity of discussing the new mandates for the Working Groups in 2015, as the current mandates expire in October 2015.

4. Mid-Term Stocktaking and 2015 Joint Report

The state of play of the stocktaking process included many steps such as National Reports, external evaluation, discussions at DG meetings and Education, Training and Youth Forum, etc, and main points presented by the Commission stated:

- the importance of ET 2020 as an integrated framework and relevance of the main target (Europe 2020 headline target);
- strategic objectives' contribution to the headline target and the need to have focused activities to meet the objectives;
- possible move from 3-year cycle to 5-year cycle in order to promote better alignment with the overall EU strategy, as well as focusing on implementation and reducing the reporting burden.

Working Sessions

Within the HLG meeting three parallel Working Sessions were held, promoting discussions on the ET 2020 structure and objectives, ET 2020 priorities and deliverables 2015-2017, ET 2020 mutual learning, peer learning, peer review, and ET 2020 governance and working methods, including reporting. As a result, the following points were highlighted:

- **ET 2020 added value and strategic objectives** – a majority of MS stated that the ET 2020 has had a clear added value and impact on national education and training policies. There is no significant call for substantial review of the ET 2020 four strategic objectives. Europe 2020 strategy and ET 2020 have to be seen as complementary and interlined initiatives, promoting better integration of policy challenges, debates, data / information, expertise in order to make ET 2020 more visible as well as promoting holistic approach to education and stressing some of the topical issues including labour market needs, employability of graduates or digital progress.
- **ET 2020 priority areas and priority actions** – many MS indicated that the priority areas should be streamlined and working methods of ET 2020 should be more operational. Focusing on fewer priority areas could improve the visibility of ET 2020 and promote added value at the EU level, reflecting the interests of EU as whole. Several priority areas were suggested, such as basic skills; quality and efficiency in education; sustainable development in education; education and migration; VET and linkages between training provisions and labour market needs; adult education; digital learning and Open Educational Resources; teacher education and in-service training; international mobility and internationalization of education; early school leaving; modernization of higher education; early childhood education and care.
- **ET 2020 Work Cycle and Work Plan** – a support has been expressed to the 5-year cycle of the ET 2020, synchronizing ET 2020 and Europe 2020 strategy and strengthening the ET 2020 role within the overall EU



growth strategy, also considering the European Semester process. It has been noted that the annual rhythm of the ET 2020 should be kept, particularly by monitoring of progress in the Education and Training Monitor. Still, the presidencies should not be obliged to follow only the Work Plan, keeping enough room for emerging challenges and respecting the principle of subsidiarity. Some of the MS pointed out that further debate is needed on the improvement of operational nature of ET 2020. An interest has been expressed in the ministerial level discussions, also mentioning that policy discussion related to some specific aspects of the ET 2020 with the European Parliament could be useful, but not in a formal basis.

- **Mutual learning** – the importance of this process has been highlighted. Many MS expressed an opinion that more information is needed on the options for further improvement, considering the work already being done in this field and stressing that MS must have an ownership of the peer learning. Small clusters of countries would make a good use in this process. Regarding the creation of a “what works in education and training” database a solid criteria is needed to identify good practices. It has been underlined that before developing something new, a closer look should be given at the current data sources – Eurydice, CEDEFOP, etc.
- **Reaching out to the stakeholders** – MS agreed on the importance of involvement of different stakeholders. Education, Training and Youth Forum is seen as a useful instrument to bring together the main ET 2020 stakeholders on the annual basis, creating the opportunity to discuss the actual topics and challenges in the ET 2020 process.
- **Bridging ET 2020 formal and informal governance** – many MS stated that it would be necessary to use “formalizing informality” approach to informal structures. HLG and DG meetings are seen as an important platform for discussions; still some improvements are needed, particularly with DG Schools, bringing together the right people. It would be appropriate for the ET 2020 Joint Report to mention the key characteristics of the informal ET 2020 senior officials meetings (HLG and DG).
- **Reporting** – MS stated that this process should be optimized. Possibly one MS could be mandated to consult the others on streamlining the reporting and prepare the proposals for optimization.

The key messages of the HLG discussion will be taken forward in the further development of ET 2020, including at Education Committee level.

5. The Latvian Presidency’s priorities

The Latvian Presidency announced its priorities in education and training, which include:

ET 2020 and Joint Report 2015

- focus on providing a new impetus for strengthening the education agenda in the context of Europe 2020 strategy by developing a closer link between Europe 2020 and ET 2020;
- facilitate discussions and strive towards the preparation of the Joint Report 2015 that will have much more forward looking approach by seeking to establish priority areas and fields for cooperation during the next work cycle.

Strengthen the key role of education and training for growth and well-being:

- promote creativity, innovation and digital skills in early childhood education and primary education;
- enhance cooperation in vocational education and training;
- explore further development of internationalisation in higher education.

6. The Luxembourg Presidency’s priorities

The Luxembourg Presidency announced its priorities in education and training, which include:

- Multilingualism in quality education;
- ET 2020 Joint Report, taking note that the Joint Report 2015 is set to be adopted at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council in November 2015.