OPINION

of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

for the Committee on Culture and Education

on the European Education Area: a shared holistic approach to education, skills and competences
(2020/2243(INI))

Rapporteur for opinion: Ilana Cicurel

(*) Associated committee – Rule 57 of the Rules of Procedure
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SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs calls on the Committee on Culture and Education, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

– having regard to Articles 9, 151, 156, 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),

– having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and in particular Articles 14 and 15 thereof,

– having regard to the European Pillar of Social Rights, in particular its principles 1, 4, 5 and 11,

– having regard to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Paid Educational Leave Convention of 1974,

– having regard to the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth,

– having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),

– having regard to UN Sustainable Development Goal 4,

– having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),

– having regard to the Horizon Europe 2021-2027 funding programme,

– having regard to the EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025,

– having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (COM(2020)0625) and to the accompanying Commission staff working document (SWD(2020)0212),

– having regard to the Commission communication of 1 July 2020 entitled ‘European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience’ (COM(2020)0274) and to the accompanying Commission staff working documents (SWD(2020)0121) and (SWD(2020)0122),

– having regard to the NextGenerationEU temporary recovery instrument,

– having regard to Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning¹,


having regard to Council recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience²,

having regard to the Commission communication of 10 March 2020 entitled ‘A New Industrial Strategy for Europe’ (COM(2020)0102),

having regard to Decision (EU) 2018/646 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 April 2018 on a common framework for the provision of better services for skills and qualifications (Europass) and repealing Decision No 2241/2004/EC³,

having regard to Eurofound research on the impact of digitalisation on skills use and skills development,

having regard to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) study entitled ‘Empowering adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways’, volumes 1 and 2 (of 17 February 2020 and 20 July 2020),

having regard to Cedefop’s report of 18 December 2018 entitled ‘Skills forecast: trends and challenges to 2030’,

A. whereas everyone of any age group and socio-economic background has the right to quality, inclusive, accessible and affordable education, training, upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning in a barrier-free environment, as stated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, among other legislation, in order to acquire and maintain skills and competencies; whereas this enables people to develop their personal and professional goals, while fully participating in society and successfully transitioning into the labour market; highlights the important role of families in education;

B. whereas prior to the pandemic, the problem of academic failure among young people who abandon their studies and those who fall behind or have problems completing them in time, affected one young person in five, casting the Union education system in a worrying light, in that academic failure makes it difficult to find a good job and can lead, in a significant number of cases, to poverty and social marginalisation and exclusion;

C. whereas the European Education Area (EEA) is a driving force for a socially just society, economy and prosperity and has contributed to fostering common European values; whereas a qualified mobile workforce is key for a globally sustainable economy that provides stable, quality jobs and improves the well-being of society; whereas education, training and lifelong learning is not only an individual responsibility, but also a social responsibility; whereas people with few skills and qualifications, persons with disabilities and people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion; whereas strengthened cooperation

between universities and other educational institutions as well as the recognition of qualifications, learning and training periods, including those gained through informal learning and volunteering, is a crucial prerequisite for the free movement of learners, educators, volunteers and the workforce within the Union;

D. whereas the results of dual VET across Member States has been uneven, and many national systems in the Union lack the institutional capacity to provide training in this type of skill⁴;

E. whereas investing in lifelong learning education, training and the effective use of skills, including soft skills, is crucial for growth, innovation, social cohesion and the economic and social prosperity of the Union, particularly in the light of the green and digital transitions, demographic change, globalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic, which are changing the nature of work, the content of jobs and the skills and qualifications required; whereas the development of specific targets and benchmarks and a system for monitoring their implementation is crucial for making the EEA a reality by 2025; whereas training and education should primarily aim to achieve the development of learners and value the integral growth of every person, with special attention paid to all characteristics of the individual and without restricting the objectives of education solely to employability;

F. whereas in addition to crucial basic skills, it is also important to focus on multilingualism, digital skills and cross-cutting skills such as critical and innovative thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity, intercultural competencies, teamwork and media literacy; whereas all non-formal and informal skills are key for active participation and inclusion in the labour market and society as a whole; whereas, besides a strong focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in upskilling and reskilling programmes, similar attention should be paid to humanities and social sciences, since they, among other subjects, can contribute to the social dimension of the green and digital twin transition and lead to a human-centred approach to the digital and scientific areas;

G. whereas the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan sets out as a target that at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year; whereas in 2020 only 49.1% of teachers in the Union received formal education or vocational training in information and communications technology⁵; whereas progress over the past decade in adult learning participation has been slow and very uneven across Member States and whereas the target for 2020 has not been reached⁶; whereas the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies shows a constant high share of adults and teenagers with insufficient basic skills⁷; whereas the Commission has set a target for at least four in five VET graduates to be employed and three in five to be benefiting from on-the-job

⁷ Council recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.
training by 2025\(^8\);

H. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there are profound differences in access to digital education among learners, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, with one fifth of children in the Union lacking two out of five important resources for online learning\(^9\); whereas the pandemic is likely to have had a severe impact on the labour market, has disclosed a wide gap between the digital skills of people and labour market demands\(^10\), and has exacerbated existing divides and inequalities in access to education and skills; whereas these phenomena have a significant impact on citizens’ employment prospects, earnings and inclusion in society; whereas people entering the workforce during the pandemic, who are mainly young people, have had difficulties securing their first jobs\(^11\); whereas education and training, upskilling and reskilling are essential for leveraging opportunities and addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis; whereas the pandemic represents an opportunity to develop intersectional policies aimed at building more resilient and inclusive educational systems that better prepare learners and the workforce for the labour market and the multiple global challenges of today;

I. whereas in 2018, Member States invested an average of 4.6 % of total GDP in education\(^12\);

J. whereas the main beneficiaries of the NextGenerationEU programme should, as its name implies, be young people, who should be offered the broadest possible range of educational, training and employment opportunities, in keeping with a long-term vision for the EU’s recovery based on the involvement of and active contributions from the young generations;

K. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures have restricted spaces in which children can interact and develop their social skills in school, peer and extended family networks;

1. Welcomes the Commission communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025’, which encompasses six dimensions – quality, inclusion and gender equality, the green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and the geopolitical dimension – and a set of targets with the aim of improving outcomes and ensuring resilient and future-looking education systems; calls on the Member States to set priorities to achieve a functioning and effective EEA by 2025; recalls that key areas in which the Union can support and complement the efforts of the Member States need to be clearly identified and complemented with the targets developed in cooperation with the Member States, academic institutions and other relevant stakeholders, in line with Article 165 of the TFEU and the principle of subsidiarity; insists that education

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\(^9\) European Commission fairness policy brief of April 2020 entitled ‘Educational inequalities in Europe and physical school closures during Covid-19.’
\(^10\) Eurostat, Do young people in the EU have digital skills?, accessed on 8 September 2021: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20200715-1
\(^12\) Education and Training Monitor 2020.
and training be considered as a common investment for not only the recovery, resilience and competitiveness of the Union, but also for ensuring its social cohesion and allowing for personal development throughout life; recalls that the creation of the EEA by 2025 is a way to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for economic growth and job creation as well as improved social cohesion;

2. Points out that during the COVID-19 crisis, the importance of having a very high internet capacity and connectivity for all became apparent, especially in the educational sector; underlines that all connectivity and equipment gaps should be tackled as soon as possible, with a special focus on vulnerable groups; notes the efforts of the Commission and the Member States to ensure pedagogical continuity during the COVID-19 crisis; stresses that the digitalisation of education must only be complementary to face-to-face learning, not forgetting that face-to-face learning must remain the key as it also teaches valuable social skills; underlines that following the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning could become part of a modern blended learning approach; recalls, in this regard, the need to invest in innovative ways of teaching enabled by digital development; regrets that the COVID-19 crisis has increased and is likely to continue increasing youth unemployment in the Union;

3. Emphasises the need for close cooperation, a structured dialogue and exchanges of best practices on common challenges and opportunities between all relevant stakeholders involved in the areas of education and training, upskilling and reskilling at local, regional, national and Union level; calls for an effective and well-established governance system for the implementation of the EEA, building on the Union strategic framework for cooperation in education and training (ET 2020); highlights that the successful transition towards the EEA requires cooperation between teachers, trainers, learners, parents and other relevant associations and organisations, academia, civil society organisations and social partners; emphasises the need for increased cooperation and research on education which stimulates social cohesion, economic growth and innovation;

4. Calls on the Commission to assess the impact of the EEA on the basis of qualitative, and not merely quantitative, indicators;

5. Stresses the importance of reducing the percentage of 15-year-olds underachieving in reading, mathematics and science by 2025, this being a key objective not achieved by the ET 2020, but which remains essential to enable the young people concerned to go on to obtain professional qualifications and skills;

6. Highlights the importance of ensuring learner-centred, integrated, inclusive, accessible, affordable and quality education, and promoting lifelong learning, including VET, and non-formal and informal competencies, as well as providing flexible pathways to learning for learners of all ages across the Union, in order to ensure equal opportunities in the labour market; recalls that inclusive education needs to be accessible for all, with no discrimination based on gender, racial, ethnic or social origin, language, religion or belief, disabilities, age or sexual orientation; recalls, in this regard, the need to ensure equal access to employee training; welcomes the exchange of best practices and development of a Union approach to micro-credentials and individual learning accounts with a view to ensuring upskilling and reskilling and qualifications for all;
7. Considers that boosting existing education and training programmes along the lines of the Erasmus+ programme, which promotes learning mobility throughout Europe and beyond, is key to making the idea of an EEA a reality; welcomes the launch of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme, its increased budget and the new measures aimed at making access to the programme fairer and more inclusive, reducing inequalities, boosting professional training and reducing territorial disparities by simplifying administrative procedures; calls on the Commission to support all Member States so that the goals set by the Erasmus+ programme can be implemented without unnecessary administrative barriers; calls on the Commission and the Member States to promote and facilitate increased mobility for teachers and learners of all ages; welcomes the new professional mobility action, Erasmus Pro, which gives learners and apprentices the opportunity to spend 3 to 12 months abroad to develop their professional and linguistic competencies;

8. Insists on the valorisation and full recognition of vocational education and training as a path of excellence in line with the Council recommendation on vocational education and training; insists that vocational education and training be fully integrated in the EEA and recognised in the labour market; calls on the Member States and stakeholders to ensure that all VET graduates have access to the labour market and long-term professional opportunities; highlights the need to ensure effective social dialogue on VET and adult learning to consolidate efficient governance in the sector at all levels; highlights the need for some Member States to address the lack of attractiveness and prestige deficit of VET and dual education systems; considers education and training, including VET and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), in future-oriented sectors, skills and competencies to be essential; highlights the importance of improving and encouraging TVET paths; welcomes, in this context, the centres of vocational excellence initiative and the development of a Union approach to micro-credentials, modularisation and individual learning accounts; encourages the Commission and the Member States to work towards longer periods of mobility in vocational education and training, with a genuine Union apprenticeship statute, in partnership with the private sector; encourages the Commission to work with the Member States on an action plan to remove the remaining obstacles to Union mobility, such as overcoming administrative burdens and promoting language learning; recalls, in this context, the responsibility of the private sector regarding investment in VET and personalised lifelong learning; calls for the facilitation of public-private partnerships in VET, formal and informal training, and the upskilling and reskilling of the Union workforce, also to strengthen the efficiency of educational systems and to match labour market needs, without undermining the independence of educational institutions; urges the Member States to foster the employability of VET graduates in the private sector through education and training incentive measures; calls for the EEA, the European skills agenda, the Council recommendation on VET and interlinked policy initiatives to complement and mutually reinforce each other;

9. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to support the Pact for Skills, which requires collective action by Member States, companies, social partners and other stakeholders; reiterates the need for adequate funding and investment geared to achieving the goals of the EEA; calls on the Commission, in this respect, to ensure funding via NextGenerationEU and urges the Member States to devote sufficient resources under flagship initiative seven in their national recovery and resilience plans
for reskilling and upskilling to education, training and research; encourages the Member States to significantly increase public spending on education; calls on the Commission to encourage the Member States to put forward long-term strategic plans encompassing visions for the education system that are resilient to future challenges and potential crises and flexible also in terms of the fast technological changes in the digital age;

10. Calls on the Commission to encourage the Member States to thoroughly evaluate their learning curricula so they are up-to-date, future-proof and able to prepare learners to match their skills with the demands of the labour market, reflecting the plurality of societies and at the same time providing space in which learners, mainly those with disabilities or special needs or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can shape their learning processes to meet their individual needs;

11. Notes that the new initiatives that will see the light as a result of the communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025 should build upon systems and tools already developed such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, the European Qualifications Framework, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, and the qualifications framework adopted for the European Higher Education Area;

12. Highlights the role of the EEA in fostering the sense of being part of European savoir faire; underlines that basic, soft and cross-cutting skills, upskilling and reskilling and lifelong, individualised learning in the context of the green and digital transitions, demographic change, globalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic are vital for sustainable growth, productivity, adaptation to the transformations of the labour market, investment and innovation, and are therefore key factors for the competitiveness of businesses, especially micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs); recalls, in this respect, that education policies are intrinsically linked to other Union policies and that synergies need to be ensured with, *inter alia*, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the related action plan, the new industrial strategy for Europe, the new skills agenda for Europe and the European digital strategy;

13. Highlights the experience, knowledge and skills obtained through informal and non-formal ways of learning, for example by volunteering or providing informal help or care; notes that the formal recognition of these skills could help open up more opportunities in the labour market; insists that there are short- and long-term benefits of the practice of mentoring in educational systems, businesses and our society as a whole; encourages the Member States to incentivise associations and companies using mentoring programmes with thorough policies and resources; encourages the Commission to promote mentoring and to work with Member States on the development of mentoring certification and labelling;

14. Highlights the importance of supporting and preparing teachers and trainers to be able to provide quality education; underlines the importance of ensuring that teachers and educators receive appropriate, flexible, high-quality training with a special focus on digital literacy and digital skills; recalls the necessity to provide opportunities for the continuous professional development of teachers, provide mobility opportunities for them and increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession; stresses, in this regard, the importance of teacher academies, also for the VET sector, as well as of providing
financial support for training courses designed for teachers and educators; highlights the need to prepare more teachers for highly demanded subject areas like STEM or for teaching learners with special needs; highlights the need for teachers to support and be supported by parents given their complementary roles in the education of children; recalls that training courses should also take into account the multicultural and multilingual environments in which teachers and educators work;

15. Welcomes the recent changes in the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe and invites the European Education and Culture Executive Agency to assess how to further increase the visibility, continue the development and strengthen the impact of the adult learning community;

16. Calls on the Member States to develop quality dual education systems and vocational systems based on flexible curricula, strong career guidance and connections to labour market needs;

17. Calls for the establishment of paid educational leave policies in line with the ILO Paid Educational Leave Convention to allow workers to attend training programmes during working hours at no personal cost in order to promote lifelong learning; calls on the Member States to ensure access to training for unemployed workers;

18. Highlights that according to the OECD’s Education at a Glance 2020 publication, people working in the teaching profession are paid 11% less on average than people working in other professions that require a degree; recalls the need to strengthen collective bargaining to ensure decent salaries and pensions and fair working conditions;

19. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to facilitate and promote transparent mobility for all, including persons with disabilities, special needs and persons from disadvantaged backgrounds, through the full implementation of the Professional Qualifications Directive\(^\text{13}\) and the further development of the European Student Card, and to improve the use and visibility of tools such as the EURES (EUropean Employment Services) job mobility portal, the Europass online platform, which will be interoperable with the databases of job offers available on EURES, the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) classification system, Erasmus+, with a special focus on VET learners and staff, the EU Skills Profile Tool for ThirdCountry Nationals and the European Network of Information Centres and National Academic Recognition Information Centres networks; stresses the need to promote centres of vocational excellence and to enhance their relevance to skills development;

20. Highlights, in this context, the need to improve the recognition of knowledge, skills and non-formal and informal competencies gained during qualification, volunteering, learning and training periods abroad; stresses the need to improve the recognition of the skills of third-country nationals in order to facilitate their access to education and employment in the Union, through the simplification and acceleration of recognition and validation processes; underlines that specific attention should be paid to the most vulnerable groups; is of the opinion that the mutual recognition of training, volunteering

programmes, learning outcomes, qualifications and diplomas at all education levels, and progress in the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, will help to overcome skills shortages and skills mismatches and enable adults to obtain full qualifications; calls for difficulties arising from the absence of automatic validation for annual learning outcomes to be reduced; emphasises that in addition to the European graduate tracking initiative, it is necessary to monitor and gather information on emerging skills trends and developments; encourages the Member States to put into effect the 2018 Council recommendation on key competencies for lifelong learning to promote progress in all eight key areas such as opportunities for young learners to have at least one practical entrepreneurial experience during their education;

21. Recalls the need for further public investment in education to ensure fair and well-resourced education systems based on public service values and democratic governance; calls on the Member States to ensure that the upcoming recovery plans are committed to that objective and that the Just Transition Fund and European Social Fund Plus support integrated plans at local level to help upskilling and reskilling, especially for the most vulnerable groups – including people at risk of becoming unemployed – to ensure every person in vulnerable sectors can requalify and develop new skills to remain active in the labour market and benefit from the green and digital transitions;

22. Welcomes the opportunities created by digitalisation to improve inclusiveness in the labour market; deplores the persistence of the digital divide in the Union and highlights, in this regard, the need to provide access to high-speed internet, high-quality software and digital equipment as a necessary precondition for the development of digital skills, as well as competencies in STEM; emphasises the importance of acquiring social skills, language skills and cross-cutting soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, intercultural skills, teamwork and media literacy for everyone; underlines that special attention must be paid to the inclusion of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in this context, in particular persons with disabilities, also through the facilitation of individual learning paths; recalls that education systems should not only embrace knowledge and skills, but should also enhance the well-being and physical health of learners;

23. Stresses the need for enhanced language teaching and learning; recalls that language learning is an important factor that shapes a person’s professional development and is also essential for the successful social inclusion of migrants and their access to education and the labour market;

24. Calls on the Member States to ensure decent remuneration for trainees and apprentices, especially for those engaging in work-based learning; calls on social partners to conclude specific collective agreements in this regard;

25. Regrets the persistent gender employment and pay gap as well as the consequent gender pension gap; highlights, in this regard, the need to tackle gender stereotypes and to increase and support women’s representation in education, training and employment in STEM subjects and occupations as well as in other fields of knowledge and employment; stresses that it is essential to create a positive and inclusive learning and work environment and to counter unconscious bias and gender stereotypes with respect to subject and career choices; recalls the responsibility of public and private
stakeholders in this regard; notes that the future EEA framework should have an
intersectional perspective, with the aim of preventing any kind of discrimination,
including multiple discrimination;

26. Warmly welcomes the objectives of the EU’s new strategic framework for lifelong
learning and training, which was the subject of a Council resolution of
19 February 202114; welcomes the five strategic priorities identified in the resolution,
which includes in particular specific proposals to make lifelong apprenticeships and
mobility a reality for all;

27. Welcomes the commitment of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council to launch an
online platform aimed at facilitating data sharing among the Member States concerning
the challenges linked to unemployment faced by young people as a result of the
pandemic;

28. Stresses the need to include in the EEA a section devoted to the personal development
and social integration of children with special needs in centres staffed by specially
trained teachers and suitably equipped to achieve the best results in this respect.

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14 Council resolution of 19 February 2021 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and
# INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

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<td><strong>Substitutes present for the final vote</strong></td>
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### FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

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**Key to symbols:**
- **+** : in favour
- **-** : against
- **0** : abstention