



Brussels, January 2009

effe-Statement

in response to the European Commission Communication

An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training - COM(2008) 465 final

The European Forum for Freedom in Education –*effe*– is an NGO, concerned with the quality and efficiency of education systems in Europe. Our members are active European citizens from the education sector – head teachers, teachers, schools and other educational institutions, pupils/children and parents, as well as representatives from education authorities and universities. We are open to everyone who believes in child oriented learning and in the importance of plurality in education. The main aim of *effe* is the promotion of diversity in education as for us it is an indicator of quality. Our main focus is on primary and secondary education.

The *effe* is member of the EUCIS-LLL platform and is one of the European stakeholder organisations that have been consulted on educational policy questions concerning European education policy after 2010.

The updated framework for European cooperation has been eagerly awaited. Unfortunately, in our opinion the result is not what we had hoped for. Education is only referred to and viewed as “a contribution” to the Lisbon Strategy and the renewed Social Agenda. More than ever the Commission has made it clear that education is essentially a tool for job creation and, as a second thought, also for social inclusion. The use of economic language makes it obvious: “...the Open Method of Coordination has supported progress towards a set of shared objectives measured [...], aimed at increasing investment in human capital through better education and skills.” (COM(2008) 865 final, p.2) – “But upgrading skills is not enough: ensuring a better match between the supply of skills and labour market demand is just as necessary.” (COM(2008) 868 final, p.3

As a general point, we doubt that it is possible to foresee the needs of the future labour market. We also raise the following question: who will decide what the future requirements of the market are?

The members of the *effe* strongly believe that it is not just education and training systems that have to become more responsive to change. It is the users of those

systems that have to be made strong, self-confident and responsible, so they are able to adapt to change when needed.

In other words, we agree about the challenges we all face, but we do not agree with the way in which they are being addressed: the methods reflect the rules and structures of the old economy. We believe that the whole strategy is flawed. Good intentions are compromised by a fixation on outcome control such as benchmarking and tests as the means to achieving common goals.

Furthermore in our opinion the direction of policy is being shaped by two separate visions and in the efforts to converge those two areas into a common strategy, it fails to take account of what education is for.

First: The Lisbon Agenda for growth and jobs is the overall motor, so education has to be changed to make people fit for jobs. Skills are important. Therefore, achievements in languages, maths and sciences are tested.

Second: industry - the deliverer of jobs - is asking for creativity and innovation. To achieve results here, the education systems will need to change ways of teaching, open up curricula, etc.

Here occurs the dilemma: how can creativity be measured and tested in order to ensure a good ranking of one's education system? Moreover, how can creativity be imposed?

In its consultation paper on schools for the 21st century, the *effe* emphasised that in order to achieve a healthy society in which a healthy economy can prosper, the education system must follow a paradigm that recognizes education as an individual good. Attempts to formulate policy for the so-called "good of society" must ultimately fail if there is no regard or respect for the needs of the individuals who make up that society.

In our opinion Education and Training Policy should enable all citizens to enjoy their primary right to education as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Education has to be directed to "the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

In our opinion this respect also has to be present in overall policy documents such as this framework – utilitarian language such as "These are major challenges which need to be addressed to promote social inclusion and to overcome bottlenecks in labour supply"¹ already send a wrong signal.

Therefore we urgently call upon the Commission to reconsider the paradigm it is using for its framework. We suggest that following quote should be at the heart of its education framework:

"All children and young people of the world, with their individual strengths and weaknesses, with their hopes and expectations, have the right to education. It is not our education systems that have a right to certain types of children. Therefore, it is the school system of a country that must be adjusted to meet the needs of all children". (B. Lindqvist, UN-rapporteur, 1994)

¹ Com(2008)865 final, p.9

As to the four strategic challenges concerning compulsory education and early childhood education, we have the following remarks:

3.2. Improve the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes

On p.8 it is written that "Education and training institutions should be given greater autonomy, should be more open to the civil society and enterprises and should be subject to effective systems of quality assurance". "Autonomy" as such is a good thing as it allows a response to circumstances as they happen, using local experience to solve local problems. "Open to civil society" is also positive, as this will strengthen the ties between learning institutions and society. But we are concerned that "enterprises", are also mentioned even though they are a part of society. This means that they will receive special attention and the *effe* does not see this as necessary or beneficial. *effe* does not believe in state control of education nor in education controlled by the economy. We would therefore propose changing this to read: "Education and training institutions should be given greater autonomy, should be more open to society on a whole and should be subject to effective systems of quality assurance".

We strongly support the upgrading of the teacher profession, as it is widely recognized that the quality of teachers, trainers and other educational staff is the most important within-school factor affecting student performance AND development. We would therefore urge the Commission and the Member States to continue their work on the Quality of Teacher Education, taking into account the following key components of teachers' education:

- extensive subject knowledge;
- extensive knowledge of pedagogy, learning psychology and didactics (up to 30-40% of the education of teachers should consist of practical training);
- extensive knowledge and understanding of the social and cultural dimension of education;
- extensive skills and competences to guide and support learners, to run classes and maintain contact with parents and the community.

To reiterate, we oppose the plan solely to "ensure that the assessment of future skill requirements and the matching of labour market needs are fully taken on board in all education and training planning processes."² Whilst we recognise that education and training have to have regard to the needs of the labour market, they should not be totally dominated by it. In this rapidly changing world full attention should be paid to the development of the child as a rounded individual.

3.3. Promote equity and active citizenship

The question of equity can only be addressed if it is understood that every individual is different. Respect for diversity is the key: children only learn well when they feel well (Ferre Leavers 1997). Equal treatment thus requires that every child is treated differently. Efforts to promote wellbeing and participation are thus key factors in the fight against problems such as early school leaving. The main consideration is respect towards the individual.

² Com(2008)865 final, p.9

We would also like to note that the use of the word "pre-primary education" might send the wrong messages: Early childhood care and education is not schooling. Furthermore, the Barcelona target should not be the goal; the goal should be to deliver quality in early childhood education.

We agree that **early school leaving, early childhood education, migrants and learners with special needs** should be given priority. We only ask the Commission and the Member States to revise their methods of working. Recent years have shown that a large group of children suffer from stress, leading to various physical and mental health problems. We urge that the focus needs to be on socio-emotional education; making people feel confident and accepted in school as in society.

As to the working methods

4.1 Governance and partnership

We embrace the contact with civil society and stakeholders organisations. For changes to be implemented successfully they have to be supported by the people on the ground. Furthermore this will strengthen democracy within the European Union.

4.2. Mutual learning, transfer of innovation and policy development

As to the instruments used, it is our conviction that for education and training an *educational expert group* is needed. It is not acceptable that education should only be dealt with by expert networks of economists and social scientists (EENEE, NESSE). There is an urgent need for a third *expert network of educational scientists*.

Furthermore we would like to add that the stakeholders from civil society should be included on a permanent basis.

Finally we would like to draw attention to the fact that networks such as Eurydice should collect information not only from state schools but rather from a diversity of educational establishments. A lot of good practices come from different educational settings within civil society.

4.4. Indicators and benchmarks

Concerning the update of the existing benchmarks, e.g. the extension of the benchmark on low achievers in reading skills with mathematics and sciences, this raises questions on the implementation of the key competences. It appears that it is only cognitive skills that are valued.

The *effe* is of the opinion that a benchmark on early childhood education, designed purely to enforce the Barcelona targets, is questionable. It is not the number of places in early childhood care and education that will deliver the expected results. As abstracted from the EC-Conference on early childhood education in Brussels in October 2008, it is not quantity but **quality** that can help children. So, if the quality of education settings is the most important guarantee of good results then the

indicators should address the question of how quality can be assessed. It is a difficult task, but there are some possible indicators for good quality child care such as:

- Emotional and interactive relationship between carer and child
- Better qualified staff, (with not just subject knowledge but also e.g. firm pedagogical knowledge on the development of children and practical skills and competences in dealing with children)

For the reasons stated above we are not in favour of creating new indicators:

- on the link between education attainment and employability and
- on education for innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship.

On the benchmarks

- Adult participation in lifelong learning. We agree with this but want to stress that LLL is not just about developing skills for the labour market. It is also about personal development.
- Mobility
- Low achievers in basic skills
- **Languages.** We are not in favour of such a benchmark. We agree that language learning is important and we support it very much. But will this benchmark e.g. consider the fact that a lot of children enter school or a learning environment with already one or two home languages? Another worry occurs: When too much emphasis is put on purely cognitive skills, other skills and competences might be overseen as being not important. Children and young people with other qualities risk to drop out of the system.
- **Investment in higher education.** We suggest another benchmark, namely on high public investment of at least 4% of GDP in early childhood education, primary and secondary education! Furthermore a reduction in the number of young people aged 3-24 should not lead to cuts in the education budget.
- Tertiary level attainment
- Employability
- **Pre-primary education.** We are not in favour of such a benchmark. We fear that the peer pressure to achieve an average rate of participation will work against the quality of the settings. We would therefore prefer a benchmark on high quality settings. Furthermore participation is not THE solution for all personal, social and economic problems. One has to be careful: studies show what we may expect of educational settings. But we still do not know what the consequences will be if all time for children to play or just to do nothing is removed. Childhood has its own value and should *never* be measured with benchmarks or indicators without consideration of the environment of each individual child
- Early school leavers
- **Innovation and creativity.** We are not in favour of such a benchmark. Both are very complex, process-oriented activities. They are not measurable and cannot be integrated into a system of economic *best practice* thinking. Benchmarks in this area cannot be more than general indicators of processes.

As a general point we would like to suggest that benchmarks can offer a useful indicator in line with the OMC. But as experience shows e.g. in the way PISA-Test are viewed, it is important not to see them as offering absolute truths but rather as pointing towards a direction of travel. Our systems of measurement are highly fallible and we need to be wary of this. The *effe* therefore requests a thorough revision of methods of assessment and measurement before the addition of new benchmarks.

Conclusions

The *effe* is of the opinion that the priority themes are well chosen and necessary. But again we urge the Commission, the European Institutions and the Member States to change the leading paradigm into a paradigm that cares for the individual needs of people living in a fast changing society.

The *effe* sees the need for a thorough review of testing and accountability mechanisms. Testing is strangling education. We need more child-centred approaches to education which fully respect the rights of the child and which are not solely concerned with examination success. As more and more time is spent on testing procedures rather than on education itself we are turning many children and young people into failures.

Therefore, the *effe* urgently asks the European Commission and the Member States as part of the European Cooperation in the OMC to reconsider their testing systems and assessment strategies.

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