

ACHIEVING THE EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA BY 2025: A GREAT AMBITION THAT REQUIRES SUBSTANTIAL FUNDS

OBESSU position paper on European Education Area



OBESSU

Organising Bureau of
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The Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU), represents school students rights in Europe since 1975 and has ever since been advocating for **participatory, inclusive and quality education**. OBESSU welcomes the efforts of the European Commission to establish a European Education Area by 2025 but is **concerned about the lack of funds** that are dedicated to this purpose and that will undermine the realisation of such an ambitious endeavour.

The main programmes that are supposed to finance education and training and create the European Education Area, - namely the Erasmus+ programme, Horizon Europe, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Social Fund Plus, the InvestEU Fund and the Digital Europe Programme - have been subject to **budgetary cuts** in the agreement on the long-term budget of the EU for 2021-2027 reached in July 2020 compared to the ambitious proposals of the Parliament which Commissioner Gabriel was requested to back up in her mission letter. Moreover, the **lack of a common vision on education and training and the absence of guidelines for strategic national investments from the Recovery Funds on education and training** will also affect the implementation of the initiatives put forward in the Communication. To achieve the targets set by the Commission, **education and training systems will require higher and structured public investments**.

OBESSU welcomes the will of the Commission to co-develop with member States policy guidance on reducing low-achievement and increasing secondary education attainment. However, OBESSU regrets that the **pressing issue of early school leaving (ESL) is not addressed by the Commission**. According to Eurostat, in 2019, an average of 10.2 % of young people (aged 18-24) in the EU were early leavers from education and training systems, with a considerable gap of proportion among Member States. The range goes from 3% to 17% in some countries, showcasing the **need to introduce clear measures to fight ESL** and to **establish a specific European target that will help tracking progress**. Vocational Education and Training (VET) could play a crucial role integrating ESL if a support mechanism with proper counselling would systematically be implemented. Despite the slight improvements of the last 5 years, **the percentage of early school leavers is intended to increase in 2020 as an effect of school closures and lack of educational and mental support for students during the Covid-19 pandemic**. In this regard, the Communication should address more directly the **link between ESL and inclusion**. In fact, while inclusion is mentioned as a pillar of the EEA, little relevance is given to finding ways in which education systems can integrate and welcome all kinds of learners. Rather, it seems that this policy reinforces the idea that VET institutions should be the sole players in ensuring inclusion, upskilling and reskilling. What we would like to see, as learners, is a **general change in the way inclusion is perceived and the way in which talent is stimulated: by putting the learner at the core of the process and proposing alternative measures and pedagogies** (e.g. including a less ableist approach to education, promoting the history of more women in history and sciences and so on).

We are worried that, even in the light of the concerns raised by the global health crisis, **mental health education is not considered as a priority yet. Paying significant attention to the well being and mental health of students and teachers is fundamental to ensure an effective learning process**.

This is why OBESSU has been advocating for **mental health education to be a part of national curricula** and demands that **secondary schools build supportive and preventive environments for students. Developing skills for self-care and mental health is also of the utmost importance in VET and Apprenticeships** due to the many jobs and placements lost during the Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertainty over the future of training and apprenticeships. These measures would result in more resilient learners and educational systems within the EU.

While tertiary education institutions were already largely using online platforms to deliver courses before the Covid-19 pandemic, we sadly witnessed that secondary education and VET institutions were not ready to shift to online learning platforms. This is a result of the lack of financial resources and digital training for teachers and students. Moreover, in work-based learning and apprenticeships, the lack of material for distance-training has been a massive issue which heavily disrupted the right to quality education for many learners and **suggests that further efforts on ensuring a green and digital transition should be made with regards to VET. Massive investment at the national and European level in developing digital competences and skills for teachers and learners, as well as public and independent online learning platforms is of the utmost importance.**

When it comes to the establishment of 50 Centres of Vocational Excellence, we believe that learners should play an active role and **should be invited to co-design them if we want to build a successful skills ecosystem and a quality learning environment for a resilient VET.** It is as well important to **guarantee that such centres are flourishing in non-urban areas and in all types of socio-economic contexts**, to mitigate the risk of favouring excellence where this is already a core element of learning and continuing deepening the gap with rural areas where more disadvantaged and disenfranchised learners live.

We appreciate the fact that learning mobility is considered an asset for quality education and innovation and that the European Commission aspires to reach out to wider targets (e.g. increase VET mobility) but as mentioned before this ambition requires more investments in the Erasmus+ programme. We acknowledge the obstacles that students and teachers face when it comes to transnational mobility such as financial and linguistic barriers. However, these difficulties must not be a pretext to switch to virtual mobility, but on the contrary they should represent a justification to **invest more in the programme and to work towards the full recognition of skills acquired in formal, non-formal and informal learning environments.** Furthermore, **learning mobility of school students and VET learners must be guaranteed in the next Erasmus+ programme.**

We endorse the effort to make multilingualism a priority in schools from an early age as it will give access to students to a larger variety of opportunities in the future as well as foster their global competences. **High quality training for teachers to develop their capacity to teach in a multilingual and multicultural environment is essential to make multilingualism a reality in schools.**

We regret to see that a culture of active participation of school students and VET learners in decision making processes affecting their education is not promoted at the European level. While teachers are recognised as relevant stakeholders and their contributions valuable, we regret that the Communication does not give the same status to school students and VET learners. **When it comes to the means and milestones for implementation, we would like to reiterate the fundamental role that learners and learners' organisations play.** As learners' representatives at secondary level and based on our expertise, we believe we could contribute to co-shaping innovative and multi-disciplinary teaching and learning approaches for basic skills, defining quality learning mobility frameworks, as well as in contributing to policy tackling low attainment of secondary education. With our expertise and experience working directly with students, we can also contribute to shaping inclusive curricula, inclusive learning methodologies and promote equality in schools. Therefore, we urge the Commission to include their participation at different levels as an indicator of quality education.

In conclusion, OBESSU supports the Commission's will to reinforce Member States' cooperation in the field of education and training. However, in order to develop a real European perspective on education and put in practice the lessons learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, **the EU and its Member States need to allocate more funds to national and European programmes meant to build inclusive, participatory and quality education and training systems.**