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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

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Subject: The contribution of education and training to social cohesion and the fostering of common European values in the context of the European Semester 2017  
- *Policy debate*  
(Public debate in accordance with Article 8(2) of the Council's Rules of Procedure [proposed by the Presidency])

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Following consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has prepared the attached discussion paper, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 17 February 2017.

**The contribution of education and training  
to social cohesion and the fostering of common European values  
in the context of the European Semester 2017**

**Presidency discussion paper**

This policy debate represents one of the thematic discussions that are being held as part of the Council's contribution to the European Semester 2017 with the Presidency's overarching theme being 'enhancing the socio-economic climate for a better Europe'. The Presidency's objective is to ensure that all relevant Council formations, such as the Education Council, and their preparatory bodies contribute towards the **European Council** debate on the European Semester.

The Presidency believes that the Education Council should focus its contribution to the 2017 European Semester on **social cohesion and the fostering of common European values**. This is because the European Union (EU), having brought half a century of peace, security and prosperity to the continent, must promote core fundamental values that enhance inclusion in diversity.

There are a number of issues raised by events in Europe and the outside world which have led to concerns amongst EU citizens necessitating attention and common action at EU level. Events such as the 2008 and 2009 economic and debt crises have resulted in persistent unemployment and low wages which have negatively affected young people leading to a stifling of real wage growth. Current instability in Europe's neighbouring countries has contributed to increased migration flows, a rise of radical ideologies, violent extremism, terrorism and other security issues.

One must also bear in mind recent and upcoming political realities such as the result of the UK referendum on exiting the EU, the outcome of the US elections on transatlantic relations, and the rise of populist parties which are a matter of common concern for the EU and its Member States.

It is therefore crucial that we revisit and reiterate that the EU is based on a number of fundamental values that should not be taken lightly or for granted. These common values and general principles of law, as enshrined in Articles 1 to 3 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), constitute Europe's socio-political and cultural heritage and define who and what we are: an ever closer Union among European citizens based on unity in diversity. Therefore, education policy has a prime role to play in order to foster inclusion and respect for diversity in the EU.

There is a need for a fresh and firm drive towards rebuilding trust in the European project, particularly among Europe's younger generation. These challenging times need to be converted into opportunities to build a stronger, more cohesive and social Europe which creates economic prosperity and a sense of well-being for our citizens of all age groups transforming them into life-long educated, active and democratic EU citizens.

The education and training policies of EU member states must offer a high quality education with equal opportunities for all. European citizens should have access to quality education. This means that education systems should be based on robust inclusivity, equality and equity and should provide skills, values, aptitudes and innovation (particularly the digital agenda) that are necessary for employability and for life more generally. These factors should prevail in any formal, informal and non-formal education and learning systems, starting from early childhood education and care, if it aims to make a difference to its citizens by providing a safety net against social exclusion.

As stipulated in UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, as well as the recent European Commission Communication on improving and modernising education (COM (2016) 941 final), it is imperative that all learners acquire high quality education, knowledge and skills required to promote socio-economic development and social cohesion. Education policies should thus promote social and civic competences, non-discrimination, social inclusion, critical thinking, media literacy, intercultural understanding, a tolerance for diversity and the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity besides culture's contribution to sustainable development.

In Europe, there is a need for more individualised support to young people with different and special needs and who are at high risk of early school leaving and social or economic deprivation. We must also build bridges between formal education and informal and non-formal learning. Initiatives such as the new European Solidarity Corps for young people to acquire skills and experience through voluntary activities, grass root projects financed through Erasmus+, and enhanced use of on-line platforms and virtual exchanges are all relevant and ought to be encouraged. We also need to reassert the importance of mobility and eTwinning projects that promote European citizenship.

In light of the above, Ministers are invited to exchange views and share experience in relation to the following questions:

1. Re-visiting the EU's fundamental values to build a stronger, more cohesive and socio-economic Europe: Education policies must be all inclusive and promote the respect for diversity in the EU. However, the recent PISA 2015 results show the negative impact socio-economic disparities are having on a learner's overall educational attainment. Improving the educational skill set of marginalised learners and workers through high quality education and training will make a significant difference to close these disparities and mitigate educational inequalities. What are Member States doing in this regard?
2. Moving away from a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality in education and training policies: There is a need for more tailor-made curricula and programmes that promote individualised support to young people with different and special needs and who are at high risk of early school leaving and ultimately, social and/or economic deprivation. Can the education and training programmes provided by the EU Member States be improved through the establishment of national and European objectives? How are Member States supporting continuous professional development of teachers, educators and other teaching staff, including initiatives for them to share experiences and approaches for more and better inclusion in diversity?

To give all Ministers an opportunity to fully participate in an interactive manner, thus contributing to a fruitful discussion, interventions must be as concise and brief as possible. This will enable Ministers to intervene more than once if necessary.

The Presidency's aim is to send a synthesis report highlighting key messages arising from all relevant Council formations contributing to the European Semester of 2017 to the European Council next March.