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Subject: Giving learners a voice: how to improve and modernise our systems to provide high quality education for all
- *Policy debate*
(*Public debate in accordance with Article 8(2) of the Council's Rules of Procedure*) [*proposed by the Presidency*]

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 take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 22-23 May 2017.

**Giving learners a voice:
how to improve and modernise our systems to provide
high quality education for all**

Presidency discussion paper

The Council of 17 February 2017 held a policy debate on "The contribution of education and training to social cohesion and the fostering of common European values in the context of the European Semester 2017". During that Council, education ministers recalled the role that education policy has had over the years in instilling social cohesion and inclusion in the European Union (EU) and its Member States and the fact that this has contributed to half a century of peace, security and prosperity for the continent. Ministers also emphasised the need to revisit and foster core, common European values in education and training policies across Europe that enhance inclusion in diversity and to renew a drive towards rebuilding trust in the European project, particularly among Europe's younger generation.

One of the key features emerging from the policy debate held last February was general agreement that it is now necessary that we convert challenges into opportunities to build a stronger, more cohesive and social Europe. The vision should be one of inclusion in diversity, to create economic prosperity and foster a sense of well-being in our citizens of all age groups, transforming them into life-long educated, active and democratic EU citizens. Ministers emphasised the relevance of providing quality education based on robust inclusivity, equality and equity, with the proper skills, values, aptitudes and innovation, particularly the digital agenda, 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, thereby providing a safety net against social exclusion.

The Maltese Presidency's objective is to continue discussing ways of ensuring inclusion in diversity in education and training available for all. To this end, the Presidency has invited learners across the educational spectrum in Malta to participate directly in this policy debate. They will be given the opportunity to raise certain issues on how to improve and modernise education and training directly with policy makers during the Council itself. It is a unique opportunity to get stakeholders and policy makers together and learn more on how the grassroots perceive ways to improve and modernise systems to provide high quality education for all.

The relevance and justification for providing a platform for learners is indeed widely documented. A lot has been written and empirical studies have been conducted on the importance of learner engagement and democracy in education and the need to take their concerns seriously, for instance when developing and enacting curricula for schools and educational policy more generally.¹ This will enhance meaningful engagement in learning processes which consequently increases a learner's civic role in the continuous development of democratic societies.

In the context of EU policy documentation, inclusive education is identified as a high priority particularly in the ET2020 policy framework, in the Commission's Communication on 'Improving and modernising education' (the education strand of the New Youth Initiative), in OECD reports (for instance 'Students' Well-Being: PISA Results 2015 (volume 3)')² and in the Council Conclusions on 'Inclusion in Diversity for a High Quality Education For All' adopted by the Council on 17 February 2017. In this context and to live up to the values mentioned above on inclusion and active citizenship, based on democratic principles, a learner's perspective needs to be voiced and taken into consideration at political level.

¹ See Cammarota, J. and Fine, M. (2008); Cook-Sather (2006); Fielding (2004); Fielding (2012); Flutter and Ruddock (2004); Mitra (2004); Mitra and Kirshner (2012); Munns (2012); Portelli and Reed (1996); Portelli and Vibert (2002); Smyth (2006); Smyth (2012); Tuck (2012).

² This OECD report was launched on 19 April 2017. See <http://www.oecd.org/pisa>

Ministers are invited to exchange views and share experiences based on the following questions:

1. Re-visiting the Council Conclusions on 'Inclusion in Diversity for a High Quality Education For All' of 17 February 2017: One of the main conclusions invited the Member States, in accordance with national circumstances, to encourage approaches that support learners in education and training, including through gathering student feedback on their learning experiences, together with inclusivity and equity provisions that try to compensate for different starting positions, i.e. provisions that go beyond equality of opportunity. What are Member States doing in this regard to include and provide learners with a stronger voice?
2. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): Current PISA results, based mainly on competences in reading, maths and science, will not serve us well to fulfil the democratic values of critical and engaging citizens. Different and alternative forms of assessment could be considered, where appropriate. However, the PISA survey provides interesting information on equity, inequality and the socio-economic characteristics of students in relation to their basic skill levels.³ How do Member States intend to include such aspects in the assessment of the performance of their education systems? Do Member States feel there is a need to do more at international level to collect and analyse data on citizenship and inclusion?

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.

³ In the near future, it will also include 'global competences' in its survey (PISA 2018) to measure a student's capacity to address issues of local, global and intercultural significance, to take multiple perspectives, to interact successfully with others and to take responsible action toward sustainability and well-being.