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From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Delegations

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Subject: Council Resolution on education and training in the European Semester

Delegations will find in the annex the Resolution on education and training in the European Semester, adopted by the Council at its 3750th meeting held on 20 February 2020. The Resolution will be forwarded for publication in the Official Journal.

Council Resolution on education and training in the European Semester: ensuring informed debates on reforms and investments

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

recalling the political background to this issue as set out in the Annex,

HIGHLIGHTING THAT

- the European Semester is a governance process which primarily helps Member States to coordinate their economic, employment and fiscal policies; therefore, it also, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy, addresses structural reforms in other policy areas, such as education and training, that can boost jobs, growth and competitiveness, and have a positive spill-over effect;
- soon after the establishment of the European Semester framework, education ministers highlighted their readiness to contribute to the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Semester. In the past decade, this has taken various forms and been expressed in different ways;
- at the end of the 2020 strategic period and looking ahead, it is important to enhance the contribution of the education and training sector in European Semester discussions, in order to ensure evidence-informed debates on reforms and investments in education and training, without making the process too complex and administratively more demanding;
- European cooperation in the area of education and training addresses common education and training related challenges, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity and Member States' competences, which similarly needs to be reflected in the European Semester process.

AND IN THE LIGHT OF

- the new growth strategy – the European Green Deal – mainstreaming sustainability in all Union policies, including education and training.
- the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020, with its refocus of the European Semester on sustainable development and the attention it draws to:
 - improving the inclusiveness and quality of education and training systems to foster the inclusion of all people in tomorrow’s societies;
 - addressing the digital skills gap;
 - reforms in initial education and training needed to reverse the trend of an increasing underperformance in reading, maths and science;
 - the development of comprehensive skills strategies focused on the individual needs for up-skilling and re-skilling;
 - supporting adult workers to develop broader skills sets at a higher level;
 - reducing early school leaving and increasing the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training;
 - investing in skills development and in quality education and training, in order to achieve higher productivity and innovation, as well as its importance in promoting fairness, fostering inclusion and ensuring cohesion in the Union;
 - improving the quality of public finances, in particular in areas that foster long-term growth, including education.

- the first ever joint policy debate held between ministers of finance and education in Brussels on 8 November 2019 on 'A strong economic base for Europe: pursuing effectiveness, efficiency and quality of education and training', in which ministers:
 - highlighted human capital as a crucial factor in enhancing economic growth, competitiveness, employability, social cohesion and inclusion, as well as resilience of societies;
 - stressed the need to step up effective and efficient investment in education and training, skills and competences, in terms of quality, quantity, inclusiveness and equity;
 - pointed out the wider spill-over effect of investing in education and training, which has a positive impact on current and future spending in areas such as employment, health care and social services, leading to social fairness and prosperity.

ACKNOWLEDGES THAT

1. In terms of progress made towards the education and training (ET) 2020 benchmarks¹, the ones referring to tertiary education and early childhood education and care have already been met on the Union average level. Furthermore, the benchmarks regarding employed recent graduates and reducing the share of early school leavers are close to being reached. However, reaching the benchmarks regarding underachievement of 15 year-olds in the PISA test, as well as adult learning remains a challenge².

¹ According to the latest data from the [ET Monitor 2019](#), the share of 30 to 34 year-olds having successfully completed tertiary or equivalent education, with a target of 40%, has reached 40.7%. As regards the share of children aged between four and the starting age of compulsory education participating in early childhood education, with a target of 95%, a rate of 95.4% has been reached. The share of early school leavers, with the target below 10%, is currently 10.6%. Regarding employed recent graduates, with a target of 82%, the share currently stands at 81.6%. As far as the share of adult participation in learning is concerned, it has been increased only to 11.1%, falling short of the 15% target.

² According to the latest PISA 2018 study, there is a continued high share of underachievers in reading (21.7%), maths (22.4%) and science (21.6%), reflecting the performance of one in five 15 year-olds in the EU still far from the respective EU target.

2. The progress made by the Union towards its **ET 2020** benchmarks represents a valuable contribution to the achievement of the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights³, as well as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4⁴.

NOTES THAT

3. Over the past decade, the European Semester policy content has given increased attention to the challenges and objectives related to education and training, which has been reflected in a higher number of related country-specific recommendations (CSRs).⁵ The number of Member States receiving such CSRs has also gradually increased and included all 28 Member States in the 2019 European Semester cycle.
4. In the 2019 European Semester cycle, a new annex was introduced in the country reports, presenting the preliminary Commission services' views on the European Semester priority investment areas and the Cohesion Policy funding 2021 - 2027, reflecting, inter alia, the need to prioritise investments in education and training.
5. Certain trends in education and training, related to the European Pillar of Social Rights, are monitored through the Social Scoreboard.

³ *'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.'* (first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017).

⁴ *'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'*. (UN Sustainable Development Goal 4).

⁵ According to the [Assessment of the Europe 2020 strategy - Joint report of the Employment Committee \(EMCO\) and Social Protection Committee \(SPC\)](#) (2019), in comparison with the total number of CSRs, the number of CSRs in the areas of employment and social policy has been constantly increasing. In 2018, more than half of the CSRs included employment or social issues. In the entire 2011 to 2018 period, CSRs with employment and social elements were predominantly related to skills, education and training (20%).

CONSIDERS THAT

6. Education and training are essential for future sustainable growth, competitiveness and employment, and that the development of key competences⁶, as well as the promotion of mobility and lifelong learning, are important in terms of developing human capital. Furthermore, as well as responding to the needs of the labour market, quality and inclusive education and training enable personal fulfilment, social cohesion and inclusive societies.
7. It is important to take a holistic approach and develop and pursue comprehensive lifelong learning strategies and policies, taking into consideration learning in all contexts and settings — whether formal, non-formal or informal — and at all levels: from early childhood education and general school education through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning.
8. Investment in education and training is the most powerful investment that can be made in people and the future, and the social and economic returns of effective and efficient investments in education and training, for individuals, employers and society at large, are undeniable.
9. The ET 2020 strategic framework for cooperation provides opportunities for expert and analytical peer exchanges between the Member States. It also underpins the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy with informed policy debates on education- and training-related challenges and priorities, including those identified in the European Semester.
10. Education and training have had an important role in achieving the Europe 2020 Strategy objectives, with two ET 2020 benchmarks representing the Europe 2020 headline targets on education (reduction of early school leaving and increase in tertiary educational attainment). Moreover, the ET 2020 process feeds into the European Semester by means of comprehensive thematic and country-specific data offered annually via the Education and Training Monitor (ET Monitor).

⁶ As defined in the Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning.

11. The ET 2020 benchmarks can be seen as valuable policy drivers and together with the exchange of best practices among the Member States can serve as inspiration and provide impetus for the development and implementation of education and training reforms resulting in policy changes. ET 2020 peer-learning activities, peer-reviews and peer-counselling, as valuable opportunities for learning and policy review, can be useful in providing country-specific support or support to clusters of Member States in response to issues identified also in the context of the European Semester.
12. The Commission's fact-finding missions can provide additional opportunities to support the Commission's factual and analytical understanding of education and training priorities, specificities and policy developments in Member States, in order to more accurately reflect the reality.

STRESSES THAT

13. Promising but uneven progress has been made towards the realisation of the ET 2020 benchmarks at Union level, with Member States advancing at different paces and to different extents. To consolidate progress and make further improvements, additional and renewed efforts will be needed, depending on national circumstances. It is essential that Member States continue their endeavours with regard to further improving the quality, equity, inclusiveness and relevance of education and training.
14. Sufficient time is required to successfully carry out education and training reforms and for the results to become tangible, which is often longer than the annual cycle of monitoring within the European Semester. While preparing CSRs, it is essential to acknowledge Member States' responsibility and allow for flexibility in the design of their reforms, as well as sufficient time and opportunity to implement and evaluate them.

15. In discussions on education and training reforms within the European Semester, it is important to ensure proper contextualisation, as well as an understanding of national challenges and reform measures already undertaken. However, in analysing national education and training systems and respective policy responses within fact-finding missions, the scope of bilateral briefing and follow-up reporting should be focused and not overly extensive, in order to avoid creating additional administrative burdens.
16. Sufficient and effective investment in education and training is necessary to maintain the competitive edge of the Union's economy and to ensure the well-being of its citizens and enable them to fulfil their potential. Better availability and comparability of data, as well as further efforts in developing shared criteria and sound methodologies for measuring the efficiency of investment are needed, in order to substantiate the economic and social case for education and training.
17. Union funds should continue to be an important instrument for supporting the modernisation of education and training systems and respond to national and regional challenges identified in the European Semester process, as well as to other challenges and needs, as identified by the Member States.

AGREES THAT

18. The rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU should secure continued work of the education and training sector with regard to European Semester related issues by preparing timely input, insofar as they concern education and training and if relevant, including by:
 - facilitating dialogue at both political and technical levels, including possible joint ministerial meetings with policy debates addressing cross-cutting issues pertaining to education and training, such as those related to research, employment or investment in human capital and educational infrastructure;

- exploring the possibility of using the meetings of the High Level Group on Education and Training as a forum for informal discussions on European Semester related issues. Discussions on progress achieved in responding to CSRs could also be held in the Education Committee, with a focus on cross-cutting issues shared by several Member States and with the agreement of the Member States concerned;
 - inviting the Commission, on a regular and timely basis, to provide information on education and training related issues, in relation to specific milestones of the European Semester, for example as reflected in the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy and country reports.
19. Within the existing governance framework of the European Semester, collaboration should be enhanced between education and training and other sectors with overlapping policy issues, in order to enable more meaningful, better-informed discussions on reforms and investments concerning education and training. This may be supported by fostering a better dialogue between the Education Committee and the Employment Committee and, if appropriate and depending on the overlapping policy issue, other leading European Semester committees. In this respect, the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU should continue and further examine the possibilities of:
- ensuring cooperation of the Education Committee with the Employment Committee, whenever relevant, with regard to multilateral reviews of CSRs related to education and training, and on topics of mutual interest relevant to the European Semester process;
 - creating opportunities for the Education Committee to provide support to the Employment Committee in the examination of the draft CSRs, taking into account the added value of providing deeper insight into Member States' education and training policies;
 - preparing, if necessary and appropriate, written contributions of the Education Committee to the Employment Committee on the Employment Guidelines, in respect to education and training related issues;

- ensuring timely exchange of information and shared planning on priorities and actions foreseen, as well as results achieved by the committees, in particular between the chairs of the Education Committee and the Employment Committee, taking into account the calendar of the European Semester process;
- encouraging the participation of the chairs of leading European Semester committees, in particular the chair of the Employment Committee, at meetings of the Education Committee, when relevant, for example at the beginning and at the end of the European Semester cycle, to brief on the state-of-play and developments that matter to education and training.

AND EXPRESSES COMMITMENT TO

20. Continue the efforts to improve the quality, equity, inclusiveness and labour market relevance of education and training, including by developing comprehensive skills and lifelong learning strategies, where appropriate and in line with national circumstances.
21. With a view to increasing the visibility of education and training and further recognising its role as an enabling structural policy, continue contributing to the European Semester and to the implementation of the new growth strategy, the European Green Deal, as far as education and training issues are concerned.
22. Continue monitoring progress towards commonly agreed targets at Union level in the area of education and training, results of which may, if relevant, feed into the European Semester process.

INVITES THE COMMISSION, IN LINE WITH ITS COMPETENCES AND WITH DUE REGARD FOR SUBSIDIARITY, TO

23. Inform the Education Committee about the calendar of the European Semester process, including its various milestones.
24. Continue promoting the ET Monitor, including its contribution to strengthening evidence concerning education and training in the European Semester process, while ensuring the ET Monitor is built on evidence-informed findings and sound methodologies, in close cooperation with Member States.
25. In preparation of the annual ET Monitor, ensure timely cooperation with Member States, as well as that the ET Monitor accurately reflects reforms carried out and specificities of national education and training systems.
26. Examine the possibility of adopting a Commission communication accompanying the ET Monitor, when appropriate, in order for it to serve as the basis for the preparation of the Council's political messages related to the most important issues, as identified in the ET Monitor.
27. Seek synergies and complementarity between different analytical exercises related to the area of education and training, in particular by ensuring better involvement of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks in the work related to indicators used in the European Semester.
28. Present its communication on the European Education Area, including the post-2020 strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, covering all education and training levels and sectors in a lifelong learning perspective. This should include benchmarks and indicators reflecting the priorities identified by the Member States, taking into account the availability and comparability of data among Member States and the outcomes of previous consultations.

29. Update the Digital Education Action Plan and the Skills Agenda for Europe, in order to react to pressing current skills challenges, as well as, in the light of technological and societal changes, to meet needs of the future.
 30. Explore ways for more comparable measuring of the different economic and social return on investments by developing measuring methodologies and indicators for public spending on education and training, in close cooperation with Member States.
 31. Closely cooperate with the OECD and UNESCO, in order to strengthen the quality of evidence-based analyses and improve the overall monitoring and reporting process, where possible and if needed.
 32. Continue to foster an open dialogue between the Commission and the Member States regarding CSRs related to education and training, taking into account the specificities of national education and training systems.
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POLITICAL BACKGROUND

1. Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') (12 May 2009)
2. Communication from the Commission – 'Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (3 March 2010)
3. Council Conclusions on the role of education and training in the implementation of the 'Europe 2020' strategy (14 February 2011)
4. Council Conclusions on education and training in Europe 2020 — the contribution of education and training to economic recovery, growth and jobs (26 November 2012)
5. Council Conclusions on investing in education and training - a response to 'Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes' and the '2013 Annual Growth Survey' (15 February 2013)
6. Council Conclusions — Efficient and innovative education and training to invest in skills — Supporting the 2014 European Semester (24 February 2014)
7. 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) – 'New priorities for European cooperation in education and training' (23 and 24 November 2015)
8. Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on promoting socio-economic development and inclusiveness in the EU through education: the contribution of education and training to the European Semester 2016 (24 February 2016)
9. European Council Conclusions (14 December 2017)

10. European Council: The New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 (20 June 2019)
 11. Council Conclusions on the key role of lifelong learning policies in empowering societies to address the technological and green transition in support of inclusive and sustainable growth (8 November 2019)
 12. Resolution on further developing the European Education Area to support future-oriented education and training systems (8 November 2019)
 13. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - 'The European Green Deal' (11 December 2019)
 14. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank – 'Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020' (17 December 2019)
 15. European Semester Country Specific Recommendations 2019
 16. Education and Training Monitor 2019
 17. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey 2018
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