

Commissioner Vassiliou's press statement

on

Rethinking Education

Strasbourg, Tuesday 20 November 2012

- I am very happy to share with you today our new "Rethinking Education" initiative.
- Why do we need to RETHINK education?
- Youth unemployment is approaching 23% across Europe and at the same time we have over 2 million unfilled job vacancies.
- The knowledge economy continues to increase demand for higher skills but more than 70 million Europeans have only low or no formal qualifications. In 2011, 13.5% of pupils in the EU left school after lower secondary education. In 9 Member States, more than half of the adult population has no or low computer skills!
- This highlights a serious weakness in our education and training systems. Matters have been made worse as the economic downturn has led many Member States to cut funding for education and training.
- My message is clear: Europe will only resume growth by producing highly skilled workers who can contribute to innovation and entrepreneurship. Efficient investment in education and training is fundamental to this. Member States need to address the challenge of improving education and training while consolidating public finance.
- That is why education and training is high on the agenda for renewed growth in Europe. Rethinking Education makes the case for immediate action and investment in education and training, in line with the forthcoming Annual Growth Survey, which President Barroso will present next week.
- To help Member States make informed and evidence-based policies, we have created individual country analyses and the new annual Education and

Training Monitor which provides detailed information about the performance of education systems and skills supply, at both EU and national levels.

- We suggest that Member States focus reforms in three areas: quality, accessibility, and funding.

Firstly, quality: What should EU education and training systems deliver?

- If we are to combat youth unemployment, the link between education systems and the labour market must be strengthened at all levels.
- Our analysis reveals major differences between Member States in the provision of key competences. We need to see concrete action plans to address system-related weaknesses which result in insufficient levels of both basic and transversal skills.
- Apprenticeships are one very effective way to do this and I urge all Member States to develop more work-based learning schemes.
- In particular, I support and welcome the initiative by EU Ministers of Education to boost cooperation to increase both the quantity and quality of work-based learning. The first steps will be taken at a meeting of EU Education Ministers in Berlin next month.
- Foreign language skills are especially important in times of crisis as they can open up new opportunities. That is why we are proposing a new benchmark on foreign language competences.
- We shall also develop guidelines for entrepreneurship education at all levels including schools, universities and vocational education and training. This will encourage education institutions to develop more entrepreneurial approaches in areas including leadership, teacher development as well as curriculum delivery.

Secondly, accessibility: How can education and training systems enhance open and flexible learning?

- We have to ensure people have the versatility to cope with changing times and labour markets - and this means that education cannot be limited to a few years. Research also foresees that worldwide demand for university studies will greatly exceed the capacity of the existing system in the coming decades.
- It is essential that Member States create flexible options, such as high quality distance learning. Widening access and engagement through Open Education is a necessity. Technology will play a crucial role in this.
- We should facilitate the recognition and transparency of all qualifications, including those gained outside formal education. This will make it easier for individuals to explain their skills and increase mobility in the labour market and across Europe. We shall also talk to employer and workers' organisations about how to improve training opportunities for working adults.
- Developing the competences of teaching staff is a continuing and increasingly urgent priority in all Member States. A completely new generation of teachers is ready to take over and a completely new set of skills are required from them.

Thirdly, the crucial issue of funding: How can governments and institutions fund modernisation in spite of severe budget constraints?

- In times of austerity resources must be used very efficiently. Today's communication and accompanying working document provide examples of where investments in education are likely to yield the highest returns.
- The Sector Skills Councils in the UK, for instance, are designed to build a skills system that will enhance industrial competitiveness. Other examples include the Danish industry competence development fund, which covers up to 85% of employee salaries while they are training, and Ireland's REAP project, which draws up partnership plans for employers and higher education institutions - and verifies the outcomes.
- I call on Member States to open national debates on how to fund the reforms needed to modernise education and training systems.

- We need strong partnerships between the public and private sectors to ensure the best possible match between training and employment.
- Responsibility to deliver the right skills for the labour market must be shared between businesses, educational providers and other stakeholders, including students.
- We must also ensure that education and training remain equitable and accessible for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In conclusion:

- When preparing this package we spoke to a wide range of stakeholders to take their expertise into account.
- The challenge we face today is too great to be resolved by any one country or any one policy area. Delivering the right skills for the future is fundamental for ending the current crisis. There is a broad consensus around the fact that we must all work together to find the right solutions. Rethinking education is therefore a crucial contribution to this year's Annual Growth Survey and will strengthen and complement initiatives such as the Employment and Youth packages.
- Thank you.