



TEXTS ADOPTED

P8_TA(2017)0324

Academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy

European Parliament resolution of 12 September 2017 on academic further and distance education as part of the European lifelong learning strategy (2016/2142(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 8, 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in particular Article 14 thereof,
- having regard to the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002 on enhanced cooperation in European vocational education and training,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020')¹,
- having regard to the 2012 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) – 'Education and Training in a smart, sustainable and inclusive Europe'²,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on effective teacher education,
- having regard to the 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'³,
- having regard to the Council Resolution of 20 December 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning⁴,

¹ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

² OJ C 70, 8.3.2012, p. 9.

³ OJ C 417, 15.12.2015, p. 25.

⁴ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 1.

- having regard to the Commission communication of 20 November 2012 entitled ‘Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes’ (COM(2012)0669),
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 17 February 2014 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’¹,
- having regard to Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning²,
- having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the EU in 2010,
- having regard to Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning³,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 19 November 2010 on education for sustainable development⁴,
- having regard to the Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning⁵,
- having regard to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning⁶ (EQF-LLL),
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on quality assurance supporting education and training⁷,
- having regard to its resolution of 12 April 2016 on Erasmus+ and other tools to foster mobility in VET – a lifelong learning approach⁸,
- having regard to its resolution of 23 June 2016 on follow-up of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)⁹,
- having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions — Opening up education of 31 January 2014¹⁰,
- having regard to the Commission research on Education and Training 2020: Improving

¹ OJ C 64, 5.3.2013, p. 5.

² OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 45.

³ OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10.

⁴ OJ C 327, 4.12.2010, p. 11.

⁵ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

⁶ OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 1.

⁷ OJ C 183, 14.6.2014, p. 30.

⁸ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2016)0107.

⁹ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2016)0291.

¹⁰ OJ C 126, 26.4.2014, p. 20.

Policy and Provision for Adult Learning in Europe¹,

- having regard to its resolution of 10 September 2015 on creating a competitive EU labour market for the 21st century: matching skills and qualifications with demand and job opportunities, as a way to recover from the crisis²,
 - having regard to the Council conclusions on the European Pact for gender equality for the period 2011-2020³,
 - having regard to the draft Council conclusions on ‘Enhancing the Skills of Women and Men in the EU Labour Market’ of 20 February 2017⁴,
 - having regard to the Council recommendation of 28 November 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning,
 - having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education and the position in the form of amendments of the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (A8-0252/2017),
- A. whereas education systems are facing significant challenges as a result of the digital transformation, which are impacting teaching and learning processes, and the need to bolster the capacity for social inclusion and civic participation as well as personal development, and to enhance European democratic values and tolerance with a view to fostering open-mindedness and preventing intolerance of every kind; whereas, digital empowerment and self-confidence are an essential prerequisite for building strong societies and helping the unity and integration processes within the EU;
- B. whereas the European lifelong learning strategy should be reinforced; whereas every person, at every stage of their life should have lifelong learning opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills they need for both their personal development and professional progress; whereas lifelong learning, in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, which promotes active citizenship and employability, is a key aspect of education affected by these changes;
- C. whereas further efforts need to be made to enhance the synergies between education and employment, both by facilitating entry into the labour market and by enabling individuals to constantly update their skills or to learn new skills throughout their careers; whereas Member States need to find ways to protect or promote longer term investment in education, research and innovation;
- D. whereas academic further and distance education make a significant contribution to the individual’s personal development and to the formation of human capital and should be made an integral part of the European lifelong learning strategy;

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/reports/policy-provision-adult-learning_en.pdf

² Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0321.

³ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/119628.pdf

⁴ <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6268-2017-INIT/en/pdf>

- E. whereas academic further and distance education play an increasingly important role in facilitating the adaptation of workers to economic and technological change throughout their professional lives; whereas, by 2025, 49 % of all job openings in the EU (including both new and replacement jobs) will require high-level qualifications, 40 % will require medium-level qualifications and only 11 % low or no qualifications;
- F. whereas academic further and distance education are important tools in providing flexible, personalised education opportunities for all without any discrimination¹; stresses in this respect the importance of ensuring widening access strategies;
- G. whereas academic further and distance education and the use of new technologies can help to raise girls and women's awareness of new career options, particularly in areas where they are under-represented; whereas even though more women have advanced secondary school diplomas and higher education degrees, there is a need to increase the presence of women both in vocational education and in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)-related sectors;
- H. whereas distance education is one possible approach, in the context of academic further education, that because of its flexibility is particularly conducive to ensuring a study-work-life balance;
- I. whereas distance education² refers to an organisational form for teaching which affords a high degree of flexibility in learning through the use of digital education technologies, not as a replacement of on-campus education, but offering an alternative for learners who are unable to participate in on-campus education;
- J. whereas distance education refers to a method of teaching which offers flexibility in learning through the use of emerging technologies, not as a replacement of on-campus education, but offering an alternative for learners who are unable to participate in on-campus education and for workers who wish to combine work with education; whereas, therefore, digitalisation might be used as a tool providing new ways of access to higher education;
- K. whereas equality between women and men is a fundamental principle of the EU which is enshrined in the Treaties and one of the objectives and tasks of the Union; whereas equality in education offers women greater opportunities and contributes to the social, cultural and economic development of society; whereas education is a fundamental tool to combat gender stereotypes;
- L. whereas the average employment rate of women is directly linked to their level of education, with women aged 25-49 that have completed tertiary education having over 20 % higher employment rates than women with pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education;
- M. whereas distance education can have a positive effect on women's ICT skills; whereas the entry of more women into the ICT sector would boost a market in which labour

¹ As laid down in Article 21 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

² In German-speaking countries, for instance, a distinction is made, as regards distance education, between academic and non-academic fields.

shortages are foreseen and in which the equal participation of women would lead to a annual gain of around EUR 9 billion in EU GDP; whereas women remain heavily under-represented in ICT degree programmes, where they constitute only around 20 % of graduates in the field, with only 3 % of all female graduates having a degree in ICT;

- N. whereas programmes at a distance reach substantial numbers of women in societies where women lack equal opportunities for participation in conventional forms of education and training, as women still spend more time than men on unpaid domestic work and family care; whereas such courses offer them flexibility in achieving work-life balance, and whereas distance education is aimed in particular at the non-traditional-student category;
- O. whereas academic further education is one of higher education's public-service tasks and refers to courses within an academic institution that can be pursued in parallel with full-time work, generally building on professional experience and usually presupposing a university degree;
- P. whereas adaptation to accelerating economic and technological change is a major challenge for an ageing workforce and responding to this challenge will be one of the keys to ensuring the long-term competitiveness of the EU's economy;
- Q. whereas lifelong learning and career development policies might be boosted through recognition of prior learning;
- R. whereas allowing people time off for personal and training development in the context of life-long learning benefits their well-being as well as their contribution to society by empowering with more defined personal and professional skills; whereas academic distance education provides for flexible study formats that help people attain a better work-life balance; whereas university lifelong learning (ULLL) should be part of the European Digitalisation Strategy;
- S. whereas digitalisation enables flexibility and interactivity of the educational process and it is a key factor for the further development of academic further and distance education;
- T. whereas technological change demands stronger and more continuous connections between education and employment;
- U. whereas the tendency for academic institutions to be static makes reform of curricula, the rules governing courses and examinations, and entrance requirements challenging;
- V. whereas academic further and distance education are rapidly expanding sectors with significant potential in terms of economic growth and job creation;
- W. whereas many barriers to academic further and distance education courses remain¹;

Further and distance education to accompany societal and economical change

¹ A distance learning curriculum on pervasive computing:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312312226_A_distance_learning_curriculum_on_pervasive_computing.

1. Acknowledges that online and open education is changing the way that education is resourced, delivered and taken up; underlines, in this regard, the importance of open educational resources (OER) which ensure access to education for all and enhance employability by supporting the lifelong learning process;
2. Notes that many educational and training institutions are struggling to respond appropriately to the profound and complex changes that our societies and economies are undergoing and need to undertake changes in terms of governance, organisational structures and mode of operation; stresses that new, flexible and accessible forms of lifelong learning, suitable for individuals of all ages, can successfully address some of those challenges such as social exclusion, early school leaving and skills mismatches;
3. Recognises that digitalisation and the establishment of educational platforms for the purpose of cooperation and exchange of best practices are key to addressing these challenges;
4. Calls on the Commission and Member States to do more to bridge the existing technological gap between well-equipped educational institutions and those which are not, as part of the national strategies for digital skills;
5. Emphasises that lifelong learning measures are key to providing women with skills that can enable them to return to employment or improve their employment, income and working conditions; stresses the need for further improvements in women's presence and access to higher levels of academia;
6. Stresses the importance of education in combating gender stereotypes; calls therefore on the Commission to promote initiatives offering support in implementing professional distance education programmes for women, including higher education in the fields of science, technology and IT, developing training programmes on gender equality for education professionals, and preventing stereotypes from being passed on through curricula and pedagogical material;
7. Stresses that academic institutions must prepare citizens for knowledge-based societies and constantly changing economies, provide them with the know-how for independent learning and an entrepreneurial mind-set and transversal skills, such as problem-solving and adaptability, in order to explore their own pathways and reach their full potential;
8. Stresses also that academic institutions have an important role in the enhancement of active citizenship and must provide students with transversal competences such as civic, social competences and citizenship;
9. Acknowledges that a student-centred approach to education lowers dropout rates and enables students to achieve their full potential¹; stresses, in this regard, the importance of lifelong career guidance for all;
10. Recognises the potential of knowledge sharing to improve active participation as well as the international understanding of citizens in ever-changing societies;

¹ Economics of Education Editors: Dominic J. Brewer, Patrick J. McEwan, Equity and Quality in Education – Supporting disadvantaged students and schools: <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/50293148.pdf>.

11. Acknowledges the need to enhance close cooperation between educational and training institutions, local communities and the economy; further emphasises the need for better synergies between formal, non-formal and informal education providers in order to boost lifelong learning opportunities for all;
12. Is of the opinion that, at every stage of life, everyone must have the right to access learning and training opportunities in order to acquire transversal skills such as numeracy, digital and media literacy, critical thinking, social skills and other relevant life skills in order to be better able to adapt to the future;
13. Stresses the need to implement tailor-made support for on-the-job learners, apprentices and employees to ensure the inclusion of all individuals in the labour market; is of the opinion that it is crucial to incorporate new technologies in the teaching and learning process in order to equip people with the right set of skills, competences and knowledge to make them able to use digital technologies in an innovative and creative way;
14. Calls for the better inclusion and retention of citizens in the labour market, backed up by improvements in their competences through academic further and distance education and vocational and educational training (VET); highlights the need to increase the attractiveness of, and access to information on, VET options for young people and their families; recalls, in this regard, that the target for learning mobility in the VET sector in the Erasmus+ programme is far from being achieved and further attention should be given to it;
15. Highlights the importance of Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 for enhancing lifelong learning; calls therefore on the Member States to fully explore the potential of those programmes; and stresses that there should be programmes tailored to academic further education with an occupational focus;
16. Acknowledges that access to inclusive quality education is of key importance and therefore support is needed for open and distance learning to meet the special needs of those who cannot be reached by traditional delivery systems – particularly for disadvantaged groups; calls on Member States to channel investments for this purpose;

Importance of quality and flexibility in education

17. Perceives the ever-advancing quality of education, both formal and non-formal, as crucial for the EU's efforts to ensure social cohesion, competitiveness and sustained growth;
18. Stresses that to remain competitive, and to give low- and high-skilled workers alike the best chance of success, businesses together with the educational and training institutions need to offer training and career-focused education throughout people's working lives;
19. Emphasises the particular importance of quality methods for imparting knowledge and skills with a view to education outcomes; underlines the need to invest and support professional development and continuous up-skilling of the teaching staff; stresses, in this context, the need to guarantee high standards in distance education and the importance of developing new models of teaching and learning as part of the innovation process and gradual digitisation of education; recognises, in this context, that proper infrastructure and resources are vital elements for improving the quality of teaching;

20. Notes that this requires consideration for, and valorisation of, teachers, attractive remuneration and working conditions, better access to further training during working time, especially in digital didactics;
21. Calls for universities to focus on distance education on an increasingly wide scale, and to extend it to cover free short-term professional courses;
22. Stresses that students following distance education courses should have guaranteed opportunities to communicate with and be assessed by teachers, so as to ensure that students have the proper support, guidance and encouragement throughout their studies;
23. Recognises that flexible learning formats such as distance and blended learning enable people in employment to reconcile work and/or education with their family and private life;
24. Recognises the pivotal role that distance education plays for people whose physical conditions prevent them from attending on-campus classes;
25. Promotes the idea of tailor-made learning and bridging courses designed for those wishing to enter tertiary-level education who need to gain further qualifications in order to meet entry requirements;
26. Stresses the need to strive for a more flexible and personalised approach regarding career development and lifelong education and training across one's personal career path; recognises the role that primarily public but also private parties can play in providing this, while also recognising that guidance and counselling which address individual needs and preferences and which focus on the evaluation and expansion of individual skills must be a core element of education and skills policies from an early stage;
27. Stresses the importance of interactivity in improving the quality of distance education through the use of modern communication methods that allow for practical exercises, the involvement of learners in the teaching process and the development of communication skills;
28. Promotes the idea of ensuring access to lifelong learning particularly to facilitate re-entry into the workforce, including for women and carers;
29. Stresses the need for ongoing monitoring of distance education as part of the ongoing modernisation of teaching methods and tools;
30. Stresses the need for young people to develop independent learning skills (including organisation of work, information processing, critical thinking and motivation) so that, in future, they can effectively use advanced technologies to develop their skills through distance education;

Further and distance education as a development tool for universities

31. Acknowledges that academic further and distance education creates development opportunities for higher education establishments to broaden their field of competences and diversify the programs they offer in order to target new audiences and to diversify their revenue, bearing in mind that the costs of distance education are lower than the

costs of on-campus courses;

32. Recognises that distance education encourages the development of interdisciplinary fields and the pursuit of international studies;
33. Calls on universities to expand their provision of distance education;
34. Recognises the role of the smart specialisation strategy (RIS3) in developing key regional potential based on the needs of the labour market;

Technological challenges

35. Recognises the need to keep up with rapid technological change, in particular for distance education, and that the importance of and dependence on ICT cannot be underestimated; is of the opinion that ICT is a vehicle through which major educational and developmental challenges could be tackled in an optimal and cost-effective manner; believes that efforts should also be supported by major investment in education, including the use of the European Social Fund, in order to develop digital skills and media literacy at all levels;
36. Notes with regret that the lack of ICT literacy is a major issue today among both educators and learners; reiterates the importance of technological proficiency in order to be able to harness the potential of distance learning and facilitate the implementation of new teaching and learning methods;
37. Points out the need to address the digital divide and to ensure equal opportunities for all to obtain access to digital technologies, as well as the competences, attitudes and motivation needed for meaningful digital participation;
38. Highlights the fact that only one quarter of schoolchildren in Europe are taught by digitally confident teachers, which is a major obstacle preventing new methods of teaching from flourishing; calls therefore on the Member States to provide stronger support for school and up-skilling opportunities, including through IT and media literacy training and lifelong career opportunities for educators;
39. Emphasises the need to invest and support the professional development of teachers from all educational sectors and to establish lifelong career guidance services;
40. Acknowledges the importance of new digital platforms in education, while also highlighting the security and privacy issues that both academic institutions and students face;
41. Stresses the importance of STEM skills and again regrets the gender imbalance in this area;

Financial challenges

42. Acknowledges the necessity of adequate funding for quality education and tailor-made learning; highlights that distance education can provide a learner-centred, high-quality education at a lower cost; stresses the importance of greater financial and practical involvement of industry and business in vocational training;

43. Stresses the need for expenditure in education to be recognised as a long-term investment that brings lasting benefits;
44. Considers that costs must not act as a barrier to enrolment and participation in education, while also acknowledging the underlying problems leading to high costs and the inability of citizens to pay enrolment fees in some Member States; encourages therefore the Commission and Member States to better support and promote distance learning as a quality, affordable, flexible and personalised educational option;

Challenges regarding the regulatory framework

45. Acknowledges differences in the regulatory frameworks for traditional vocational training, academic further and distance education; stresses that distance education should be accredited under the same rules as on-campus education with relevant indicators and criteria adjusted accordingly;
46. Recognises the importance of active governance and the involvement of stakeholders;
47. Acknowledges the importance of quality assurance in distance learning and the accreditation of its outcomes;
48. Recalls that many existing European transparency tools such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) have been developed in isolation; recognises that in order to allow individuals to better measure their progress and opportunities, and to capitalise on the learning outcomes gained in different contexts, they need to be better coordinated and supported by quality assurance systems and be embedded in a framework of national qualifications in order to build trust across sectors and actors, including employers;
49. Recognises the continued importance of both blended and online learning, in particular in the context of VET; stresses that the combination of high-quality digital technologies and face-to-face learning opportunities result in greater student achievements and therefore encourages the Commission and Member States to better support and promote blended learning;
50. Calls on the Commission to reinforce the European lifelong learning strategy and to make academic further and distance education an integral part of it in order to promote the adaptation of an ageing workforce to economic and technological change; calls furthermore on the Commission to examine the possibility of increasing the funding for academic further and distance education through existing and future programmes;
51. Recognises the need for a comprehensive multi-sector and multi-disciplinary approach to education and training, including lifelong learning, and the need for trans-sectoral cooperation in the development and implementation of educational policies;

Recommendations at European level

52. Stresses the need to foster cooperation and the exchange of good practice between education systems; encourages furthermore the sharing of good practices by national quality assurance (QA) agencies in the development of criteria on the recognition of new modes of teaching and learning;

53. Calls for a revision of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to promote the comparability of qualifications between the countries covered in the EQF and other countries, in particular neighbourhood countries and countries with mature qualifications frameworks, in order to better understand the qualifications acquired abroad and to place people with migrant backgrounds and refugees in lifelong learning and employment;
54. Calls on the Commission to significantly reinforce support for academic further and distance education through Erasmus+ by promoting the development of European networks, and facilitating the exchange of good practices, the setting up of projects involving institutions based in several Member States, and increased accessibility for students from other European and third countries;
55. Advocates the creation of a user-friendly online platform as a one-stop shop where education professionals and learners can facilitate the exchange of best practice;
56. Calls on the Commission to develop a secure and integrated learning platform designed for and offered to European educational institutions free of charge, thus boosting the use of e-learning across the EU;
57. Acknowledges the need to further develop eTwinning and the School Education Gateway to support constructive exchanges between teachers and other practitioners;
58. Encourages the establishment of stronger links between continuous academic further education (which is not only research-orientated) and vocational and educational training for skills acquisition, and action to ensure that both can be pursued and applied for at any time;
59. Recommends the corroboration of lifelong learning efforts with a European Digitalisation Strategy and gender impact assessment of the proposed measures to be prepared;
60. Welcomes the ambitious plan to provide ultra-fast internet in primary and secondary schools and libraries by 2025, because faster and better connectivity provides huge opportunities to enhance teaching methods, to foster research and to develop high-quality educational services online; stresses that the roll-out of these technologies creates better opportunities for distance learning, particularly in rural areas and outermost regions; highlights the fact that such opportunities will enhance children's and students' digital skills and media literacy;
61. Stresses that the adaptation of education and training systems is vital to meet the increasing demand for digitally skilled professionals in the EU; emphasises that, in order to achieve a true digital single market in Europe, further efforts are needed to improve media literacy among citizens, in particular minors;
62. Highlights the importance of stepping up European efforts to make the lifelong learning strategy a reality for all, together with the objective to also provide a range of learning opportunities that can be pursued for personal development and fulfilment; encourages the Commission and the Member States to promote and invest in lifelong learning in particular in countries with a participation rate below the 15 % benchmark;
63. Calls on Member States to foster cooperation and reinforce synergies between formal,

non-formal and informal education providers with a view to reaching a wider group of people in order to better take into account their specific needs;

64. Recommends that teachers giving distance learning courses should have specific certified training;

Recommendations at Member State level

65. Calls on the Member States to ensure a holistic approach to education and to provide students with authentic, diverse and equal learning opportunities that develop their aspirations and the skills needed to prosper in both a constantly changing global economy and a democratic society;
66. Encourages Member States to build on existing validation arrangements in order to assess and certify skills, acquired through up-skilling pathways and to ensure their recognition with a view to qualifications, in accordance with national qualifications framework and systems;
67. Emphasises that further deployment of digital infrastructure especially in less densely populated areas promotes social and cultural integration, modern educational and information processes and a regional cultural economy;
68. Calls on Member States to make available opportunities for ICT training and the development of digital skills and media literacy at all levels of education;
69. Reiterates the importance for academic and training institutions to swiftly respond to the changes in society and the labour market, and to adapt and modernise their way of working and to enable students to develop skills accordingly; stresses that education is a lifelong empowerment process, which should help citizens achieve personal development, creativity and well-being;
70. Urges academic institutions to anticipate changes in society and the labour market, and to adapt their way of working accordingly; notes that, the development of future-oriented sectors, in particular the green and circular economy, has a determinant role on the type of skills needed;
71. Calls furthermore on academic institutions to offer multilingual courses geared to migrants' skills, smoothing the path to entry to educational programmes;
72. Stresses the need for greater flexibility in the Member States' education systems in order to enable more effective use of open and online teaching methods;
73. Urges Member States to improve the availability of data on the employment and social situation of graduates ('graduate tracking'), including data on the vocational education and training sector;
74. Calls on the EU and the Member States to develop and implement 'educational corridors' by promoting agreements with European universities, such as the Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED) and the networks of distance learning universities hosting refugee students from conflict areas, including through academic distance training programmes;

75. Highlights the importance of specialised school and university teacher training for academic further and distance education, so as to meet the needs of their students;
76. Stresses the need for competences and skills acquired outside the formal education system to be recognised through quality assurance and accreditation especially with a view to empowering people in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation, such as low-skilled adults or refugees; insists on the importance of validating non-formal and informal learning in order to reach out and empower learners;

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77. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.