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## **EURO-LATIN AMERICAN PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY**

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### **WORKING DOCUMENT**

**Formal and information education and continuing education in Europe and Latin America**

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## Formal and information education and continuing education in Europe and Latin America

Education has been an integral part of the European agenda, even more so since the Bologna process was set in motion at the start of the century. It is a topic which is not only relevant in economic terms, and for the chance of being able to find a job, but also carries great weight socially. Formal and information education and continuing education are tools which enable individuals to develop their potential and participate actively in society, thus achieving a better quality of life.

For this reason, just over ten years ago, the EU Member States set up a series of projects in order to reach the desired goals in this field.

In 2000, noting that the European Union was facing *‘a quantum shift resulting from globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy’*, the Lisbon European Council adopted an important strategic objective: before the close of 2010, the EU had to *‘become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’*. At the same time, the Council indicated that these changes required both *‘a radical transformation of the European economy’* and a *‘challenging programme for the modernisation of social welfare and education systems’*. Never before had the European Council recognised in this way the role which education and training systems play within the economic and social strategy and the future of the Union.<sup>1</sup>

In 2001 the European Council adopted three strategic goals to be attained by the end of 2010: education and training systems should be organised around quality, access and openness to the world. A year later the Council adopted a detailed work programme, *‘Education and Training 2010’*, in order to attain those goals. It supported the ambitious objective of the Ministers of Education to make education and training systems in Europe *‘a worldwide quality reference by 2010’*.<sup>2</sup>

To this effect, a qualitative benchmark was set for matters of education and training. This stated that, by 2010, an average of at least 12.5% of adults should participate in lifelong, or continuous, learning. This will be discussed in more detail below.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007 the European Commission created an action plan for adult learning under the slogan *‘It is never too late to learn’*. This plan drew attention to the urgent need to highlight lifelong learning in the development of the European Community as an advanced knowledge society. It takes into account that learning would facilitate sustainable economic growth which, in turn, would generate more and better jobs and greater social cohesion as well as guaranteeing proper protection for the environment for the benefit of future generations.

Two years later, in 2009, a text was adopted entitled *‘An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training’*. This includes monitoring of the 2010 work programme in education and training. This strategic framework identifies four new strategic objectives, priority areas and specific monitoring activities as well as indicators and targets

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<sup>1</sup> Commission Communication: Education and Training 2010: the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms. SEC(2003)1250.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practice in Europe. Eurydice. European Commission. 2011.

which must be attained by 2020. More specifically, the new strategic objectives are as follows:

1. Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship;
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.<sup>1</sup>

The Member States revised the figure set in 2002 to set a new qualitative benchmark of 15% of adults participating in education. This indicator must be achieved by 2020 as part of the 'ET 2020' strategic framework for cooperation in education and training. The Commission and Member States are therefore working together to achieve the agreed goals.<sup>2</sup>

The year 2010 was an important year in Europe in terms of education as it was one of the benchmarks used to evaluate the Bologna Project and the goals which had been specifically created for education.

### Education-related achievements in Europe

Owing to its social and economic impact on society, one of the most notable themes in education in Europe is that of continuing, or lifelong, education. Continuing education must be understood as education that occurs throughout a person's life for the creation of lasting skills and knowledge. These learning experiences could be formal in nature, e.g. skills training, consultancy, mentoring, orientation, apprenticeships or higher education, or informal through experience, situations, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The aim here is to integrate adult citizens, and young people who have left school prematurely, into the education system, either formally or informally. The message behind this policy is that learning is essential for ensuring economic rights and social progress as well as individual personal fulfilment.

For this purpose, as mentioned earlier, in 2002 the Member States made a commitment to develop national strategies for continuing education<sup>4</sup> in order to increase adult participation. As a benchmark for assessing progress towards this goal, it was agreed that, by 2010, 12.5% of the population between the ages of 25 and 64 should be participating in lifelong learning.

The data that we have show that, in 2000, 7.1% of the adult population of the European Union were involved in some kind of learning. This figure rose to 9.7% in 2007 (10.6% of women and 8.8% of men). In terms of individual countries, the following trends can be discerned from the 2007 data:

- in four EU countries, the participation rate in continuing education exceeded 20%. Those

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<sup>1</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Interim evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), Final report.

<sup>4</sup> Data shown have been obtained from the Labour Force Survey. The survey results specify that lifelong learning or continuing education applies to persons aged 25 to 64 who report having received education or training in the four weeks prior to the survey. The denominator is represented by the total population of the same age group, excluding those who did not respond. The information gathered refers to education and training of every type.

countries are Sweden, Denmark, United Kingdom and Finland;

- three EU countries (Austria, Slovenia and the Netherlands), together with Norway and Iceland, exceeded the target in 2007;
- the adult participation rate in learning activities was below 5% in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Slovakia and Portugal.<sup>1</sup>

It must be added that the question of young people leaving the education system prematurely<sup>2</sup> has also been a key area of concern in the education policy. The goal here was to reduce the average number of people in the EU leaving school prematurely to 10% by 2010. When the goal was set, nearly one in six young people aged between 18 and 24 was classed as a premature school leaver. As such, the rate in 2000 was 17.6%. This fell significantly by three points to reach 14.8% in 2007. Patterns of progress vary among EU countries. In 2007 only six countries had reached the 'ET 2010' goal and five of them were already within target in 2000. Five of those six joined the EU in 2004: the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland. Finland is the only EU Member State in which the rate of premature school leaving has remained within the Lisbon target throughout the reference period. Meanwhile, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain, followed by Romania and Bulgaria, remain some way from meeting the targets set by the EU.<sup>3</sup>

The achievements are certainly striking. Reducing rates of premature school leaving and increasing rates of continuing education will always be an advantage for a country or region. However, it is also clear that the European Union, as a bloc, has not managed to meet the targets set for 2010. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the difficulties encountered in the initiative. This will serve as a guide not only for achieving the goals set for 2020 but also as a discussion point with our Latin American counterparts. An exchange of experiences in this area brings added value to the attempt to find solutions for the future.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that this discussion is of the greatest importance when considering that, currently, cooperation between our peoples on matters of education benefits students on programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, Alban and Alfa. These are cooperation programmes between higher education institutions (HEIs) of the European Union and Latin America. Their purpose is to boost the improvement of the quality of European higher education, to attract students from third countries to European academic centres and, through cooperation with institutions outside of the EU, encourage young Europeans to spend part of their higher education in third countries. Our centres are enriched by these cultural and linguistic exchanges and the education system can benefit from taking different perspectives into account.

### Difficulties in attaining the 'ET 2020' goals

Numerous factors have presented obstacles to reaching the intended goals. However, we will mention five which are particularly relevant.

One of the greatest difficulties which we have encountered in Europe is providing financial incentives for creating formal and informal education and, especially, for creating a solid

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<sup>1</sup> Unesco, Institute for Lifelong Learning. Global report on adult learning and education. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> In line with the Eurostat definition, leaving school prematurely refers to the population aged between 18 and 24 who left lower secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practice in Europe. Eurydice. European Commission. 2011.

programme of continuing education.<sup>1</sup> As such, financial limitations become significant obstacles to participation by adult students in formal education. This is especially true in the case of people on low incomes, those excluded from the labour market and people vulnerable to exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Another problem evident in the current system is that the education system as it is constituted is a 'deficit oriented model'.<sup>3</sup> This gives rise to a sense that people who enter the system in order to participate do so on account of their intellectual and academic gaps or failings. It is therefore necessary to move to a model in which diversity is valued. An inclusive focus.

Similarly, geographic disparities and physical access to learning infrastructure present huge problems for attaining the established targets. Delivering education in rural or remote areas is a challenge for lifelong learning, especially when considering that such areas tend to be the poorest and most disadvantaged. In the same way, the time required to be spent in class is another reason for many to drop out.<sup>4</sup> This goes hand in hand with the matter of the inflexibility of some aspects of the programmes available, for example timetables and modular structures.

For adults, not having the qualifications which enable access to formal education represents another of the obstacles which have to be faced by those who have taken the decision to enter the education system. For example, it is often the case that, in order to be admitted to a formal educational institution, candidates are asked for the certificates of their previous studies. This is a problem because many of the candidates for this option specifically lack such documents.

Finally, one of the principal problems that we are facing is that the public still does not understand the concept and vision of what continuing education is. This implies a weakness in communications with individuals and in the way in which this life choice is being promoted.<sup>5</sup>

To conclude, and taking into account the difficulties just cited, it is important to produce some ideas on future strategies.

### Strategies for removing obstacles to education

- Creating a clear legal framework for States and incentives for private companies in order to have a sufficient budget to be able to offer the public high quality continuing education.
- Creating financial incentives for people outside of the education system. It must be remembered that, in some countries, there is government support for people who do not have a job. This is why it is necessary to create the means by which to make education a more attractive option. Such schemes could take the form of direct or indirect financial support and could offer adults the opportunity to take some time out for study. In general then, it is a matter of creating direct financial support, tax incentives and study leave, among other options.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Summary Report on the Peer Learning Activity on Adult Learning Monitoring. Bratislava, 22 – 25 March 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practice in Europe. Eurydice. European Commission. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Peer learning seminar: critical factors for the implementation of lifelong learning strategies and policies. 19-21 May 2010, Vienna, Austria.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

- Promoting the formation of associations which act as multi-stakeholders and which are encouraged to work together by the State to achieve specific goals related to lifelong learning.
- Drawing attention to the matter of national qualifications frameworks which are closely related to the adult education programme.
- Creating a legal framework on the theme of access to higher education, bearing in mind issues of recognition and/or validation of previous studies; this framework would also take into account acquisition of empirical knowledge on the part of individuals through informal education.
- Creating new channels of education, for example online education (e-learning), along with staggered programmes to ease the problem of timetabling for participants.
- Training for staff who provide this kind of education, bearing in mind that the group has certain specific characteristics but, at the same time, may be very diverse.

Strengthening promotional campaigns and developing intelligent communications strategies to increase adult participation in education and training. These kinds of communications strategies can be disseminated by television and radio, in schools, in companies, in neighbourhoods, etc.

- Creating a focus on prevention to combat premature school leaving and not focusing exclusively on those who have already left. Creating enhancements in the education system, in the quality of the teachers, etc.
- Creating a defined monitoring and follow up plan which uses tools such as surveys and indicators, among others.
- In terms of corrective measures, it is necessary to continue treating the concept of a ‘second chance’ in education as a key focus area. This concept has been developed to combat social exclusion among people who have left school without sufficient knowledge to be fully integrated into the labour market.<sup>1</sup>

The points which have been highlighted above are only a few examples of the many ideas in existence for making education a reality in Europe and Latin America. Therefore, it would be wise to state, as a conclusion to this working paper, that the States of both regions, along with regional and international organisations, should make the promotion and development of education a priority on their agenda, as a matter of urgency. It should always be remembered that strengthening education will benefit not only the promoting States but also their neighbours in the rest of the world.

All of this can be applied to our counterparts in Latin America. For a large section of the population, poverty and inequality mean fewer possibilities of changing the conditions in which they live their lives or influencing the conditions in which their children will live theirs. On this question, it is useful to point out that, in Latin America, around 96% of children

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission. Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Summary Report on the Peer Learning Activity on Adult Learning Monitoring. Bratislava, 22 – 25 March 2009.

between the ages of 6 and 12 are registered in some kind of educational establishment. This figure falls to 82% for the 13 to 17 age group and stands at only 36% for the section of the population aged 18 to 23.

We therefore consider that strengthening the education system represents the tool which can reverse situations of social inequality such as the one described. It is the driver by which it is possible to create employment, improve the quality of life of citizens and create a better society, both for the adults and for the children who live in it.