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TEXTS ADOPTED

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**P9\_TA(2020)0282**

**The future of European education in the context of COVID-19**

**European Parliament resolution of 22 October 2020 on the future of European education in the context of COVID-19 (2020/2760(RSP))**

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to Articles 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and to the Protocol (No 2) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality,
- having regard to Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>1</sup>,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled ‘Achieving the European Education Area by 2025’ (COM(2020)0625),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled ‘Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age’ (COM(2020)0624),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 1 July 2020 entitled ‘European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience’ (COM(2020)0274),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 17 January 2018 on the Digital Education Action Plan (COM(2018)0022),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 14 November 2017 entitled ‘Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture’ (COM(2017)0673),
- having regard to its resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 428, 13.12.2017, p. 10.

COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences<sup>1</sup>,

- having regard to its resolution of 11 December 2018 on ‘Education in the digital era: challenges, opportunities and lessons for EU policy design’<sup>2</sup>,
  - having regard to its resolution of 12 June 2018 on modernisation of education in the EU<sup>3</sup>,
  - having regard to the questions to the Council and the Commission on the future of European education in the context of COVID-19 (O-000052/2020 – B9-0020/2020 and O-000053/2020 – B9-0021/2020),
  - having regard to Rules 136(5) and 132(2) of its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the motion for a resolution of the Committee on Culture and Education,
- A. whereas, in accordance with the European Pillar of Social Rights, access to quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning is a basic human right and essential for skills acquisition and maintenance, full and active participation in society and effective access to an evolving labour market;
- B. whereas, according to UNESCO, nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries – 94 % of the global learner population – were affected by the closure of education and training institutions at the height of the COVID-19 crisis; whereas over 60 % of learners around the world are still impacted; whereas less than 25 % of low-income countries have provided some form of remote learning; whereas in the most developed countries access to digital education was around 90 %, meaning 10 % of school pupils were still being left behind<sup>4</sup>;
- C. whereas there are still severe discrepancies at EU level, with up to 32 % of pupils without access to education for several months in some Member States; whereas, for many learners, this lack of access stemmed from an absence of digital equipment, inadequate digital skills or pre-existing disadvantage; whereas, even where learners had access to digital education, they still often had to learn without teacher, peer or home support and sometimes in an unstable home environment;
- D. whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has caused perhaps the most severe disruption to the world’s education and training systems in history, threatening a loss of learning for an entire generation of students, and may erase decades of progress; whereas this loss of learning is likely to decrease future income levels for that generation and will also potentially negatively impact labour productivity growth and competitiveness for the Union as a whole; whereas that same generation faces entering a labour market heavily impacted by the COVID-19-fuelled economic crisis;
- E. whereas educational establishments have a much wider social and pastoral role and contribute to learners’ physical and mental health; whereas the lack of direct teacher-

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<sup>1</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2020)0054.

<sup>2</sup> Texts adopted, P8\_TA(2018)0485.

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 28, 27.1.2020, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Brookings Institution, April 2020.

student interaction was shown to often affect learners' wellbeing and mental health; whereas the pandemic has underscored the critical role that teachers play in education and society; whereas teachers and other education staff have often been overstretched, highlighting the need for greater support for them and greater recognition of their work;

- F. whereas the crisis has accelerated the shift towards digital learning and stimulated innovation in education, such as the improvement of e-learning opportunities; whereas investment in learning technology companies in recent years has enhanced online education and e-learning solutions; whereas partnerships between business and educational establishments play a role in promoting innovation in the education sector; whereas the educational establishment should remain the final decision-maker on educational content;
- G. whereas, at the same time, the sudden shift to mass online and distance learning precipitated by the crisis has exposed enormous gaps in digital education policy design and delivery within the European Union and across Member States; whereas the crisis has similarly demonstrated the need for greater cooperation and coordination among the Member States on education and training policies;
- H. whereas the overnight digital transition came in a context where 43 % of Europeans lack basic digital skills<sup>1</sup>; whereas there is a direct correlation between, on the one hand, the Member State in which people live and where they live within each Member State, their socioeconomic status, their age, their income, their level of education and their employment and, on the other, their degree of digital proficiency; whereas the digital transformation and the use of new technologies impact on the labour market, requiring higher levels of digital literacy;
- I. whereas the pandemic represents an opportunity to rethink the future of education;
- J. whereas the Commission aims to establish a European Education Area by 2025;
- K. whereas the political agreement reached by the European Council on the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF) would entail severe cuts to flagship education programmes such as Erasmus+; whereas Parliament has repeatedly called for an ambitious budget for education programmes; whereas the current economic crisis should not lead to cuts in public spending on education;
- L. whereas, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, education policy is the exclusive competence of the Member States, with the Union playing a supporting and coordinating role;
- 1. Salutes the creativity and resourcefulness shown by education and training institutions, in particular their teaching and educational staff, and by students and parents in adapting to online and distance learning, especially in light of the fast-changing circumstances and uncertain times; salutes, similarly, the positive examples set by citizens, civil society and non-formal education providers in adapting their education practices and developing initiatives that have enabled learning to continue; calls for more efforts to scale up and increase the visibility of effective initiatives, and to promote best practices in all education sectors; calls on the Commission to provide a

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<sup>1</sup> Digital Economy and Society Index 2019.

platform for Member States to share good practices and, in this regard, to explore possibilities for new initiatives, such as the creation of a European Online University;

2. Underlines, however, that the sudden digital transition in education and training has also revealed a digital divide with respect to access to digital infrastructure and devices, the quality of online teaching and the skills of students, teachers and trainers;
3. Deplores the fact that we still have in Europe pupils and students with no access to digital education; reiterates the need to improve connectivity at European level, in particular in rural and remote areas, and to increase access to digital equipment; points to the cutting-edge innovation in educational computers, tablets and software in Europe;
4. Is concerned by the digital skills gaps among teachers and students, which hinder effective digital education; recalls, therefore, the need to invest in upskilling and professional development opportunities for teachers and trainers across Europe to ensure that they not only have, but also can teach, digital skills; points to the value of teacher mobility and knowledge sharing as a key tool in that regard and calls on the Commission to further support such activities;
5. Notes that the crisis has impacted different education and training sectors to different extents, with higher education institutions often faring better thanks to existing infrastructure, resources and experience with digital tools; highlights that disruption to early childhood education, school education, vocational education and training, adult education and non-formal education has been more severe, and calls for more efforts to deliver effective distance learning for those sectors; recalls the need for adequate financial support in that regard;
6. Calls on the Commission to collect, assess and publish data from across the Member States on the pandemic's impact on learners' participation in distance education, with a particular focus on where they could not participate due to a lack of digital means; calls on the Commission, furthermore, to collect data on teachers' digital skills across Member States;
7. Notes with alarm that the digital education gaps have exacerbated existing inequalities – both among and within the Member States – and have had a disproportionate impact on those already suffering social, economic or other disadvantages, those with learning difficulties and disabilities, and those from other vulnerable or minority groups; stresses that this digital divide must be closed as an immediate priority;
8. Recalls, furthermore, the vital social role that schools and other educational establishments play, for example in providing access to regular meals and pastoral support; highlights the negative effects of lockdown measures on learners' mental health and wellbeing, in conjunction with stress surrounding assessment and grading and isolation from peers;
9. Welcomes, therefore, the efforts made by education professionals and Member States to ensure that in-person learning can resume in a COVID-19-secure environment; calls on all Member States to do what is required to guarantee in-person learning for all; recognises the challenge inherent in the reopening of educational establishments and deplores the lack of coordination or exchange of best practices at European level; calls on the Commission and the Member States to work closely together to minimise the

health risks for staff and learners and to maximise the chances that in-person education can continue; believes, at the same time, that, in the event of another lockdown, education institutions must be equipped to provide quality digital learning to all learners and to address mental health and wellbeing in cooperation with parents and other relevant stakeholders;

10. Stresses that social and educational inequalities often take root in early childhood and tend to widen through adulthood since lower educational attainment typically leads to worse employment prospects, which in turn tend to lessen access to in-work training and development opportunities;
11. Is concerned by the uneven levels of digital illiteracy brought to the fore by the crisis, with many people struggling with issues of basic online data protection, cybersecurity and information literacy; highlights the particular challenge of disinformation and fake news in this regard; emphasises the importance of teaching basic digital and information literacy skills through a genuine lifelong learning approach, and underlines the need to improve access to digital skills teaching for older people and people from disadvantaged groups; calls for large-scale European digital literacy initiatives, to be anchored in the revised Digital Education Action Plan;
12. Considers that the primary lesson to be learnt from the crisis is that inclusion and equal opportunities, both in terms of access and quality, must be placed at the heart of the Union's future education and training policies;
13. Underlines that the crisis has shown the need for a multi-stakeholder and co-creation approach to education policy, with teachers and trainers, learners, non-formal education and training providers, parents, businesses, civil society, trade unions and local authorities being included in both design and delivery; recalls that learning takes place across formal, non-formal and informal settings and that policymaking must be geared towards this multi-setting approach;
14. Is convinced that the crisis offers an opportunity for deep reflection on the future orientation of education and training policy and its place within the broader post-pandemic recovery agenda; underlines the central role that education plays in the green and digital transitions; recalls that the European Green Deal recognises the key role of schools, training institutions and universities in driving change;
15. Believes, furthermore, that now is the time to rethink and modernise curricula and learning methods and to speed up the pace of change; encourages the Member States to embrace digitalisation and innovation and build new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, adaptive learning solutions and gamification, into their education and training systems in a smart, learner-centred way; underlines the need to study the impact of innovative technologies in education and to promote best practice examples at European level; recalls the importance of the legal and ethical principles underpinning intellectual property in the context of digital education content; stresses that the use of digital technologies should be built into education from an early age with proper adult and professional supervision and the highest standards of data and copyright protection;
16. Stresses that there is no replacement for direct interaction between teachers and learners and that only in-person learning can effectively ensure the acquisition of interpersonal

and social skills; considers, therefore, that while the pandemic is likely to herald a shift to a more hybrid model of education combining in-person classroom learning with e-learning solutions, in-person learning must remain at the heart of education and training; recalls the importance of the study of the humanities and believes that they are essential in complementing STEAM subjects and entrepreneurial skills;

17. Considers that better cooperation and coordination among the Member States and a more ambitious Union education and training policy would have improved the effectiveness of the response to the COVID-19 crisis, and urges the Union to play a more active coordinating role going forward;
18. Calls on the Commission, therefore, to propose a bold policy framework for future European education policy, transforming the European Education Area from a loose vision based on broad principles into a concrete work programme with a set of measurable objectives, including making the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications, diplomas and learning periods abroad a reality in the Union by 2025 at the latest; urges the Commission to take a similarly bold approach to the upgraded Digital Education Action Plan, shifting from a collection of disparate actions to a fully fledged digital skills and education strategy; insists that the Commission actively involve Parliament at all stages of policymaking;
19. Insists that future European education policy must be built around a joined-up policy framework that ensures that relevant policy initiatives – such as the European Skills Agenda, the European Education Area, the Digital Education Action Plan, the Youth Guarantee and the Child Guarantee – are complementary and support clear overall policy aims; considers that the education dimension needs to form part of the dialogue with citizens, for example in the framework of the future Conference on the Future of Europe;
20. Notes that progress towards a European Higher Education Area is considerably more advanced than similar processes in other education sectors; urges the Commission, therefore, to focus greater efforts on other education sectors, in particular early childhood education, school education, adult education, and vocational education and training, through a lifelong learning approach;
21. Recalls that the Erasmus+ programme is the primary funding instrument to support the construction of the European Education Area; underlines the value of tools developed with Erasmus+ support to produce and share teaching resources, for example through e-twinning, and to develop teacher training modules, for example through the School Education Gateway; believes that such tools should be scaled up, better funded and actively promoted within the education community in order to make a real difference to online teaching and learning; recalls its support for the Erasmus+ programme to complement mobility, but not replace it, with virtual learning and cooperation tools; points to the valuable contribution made by a number of education-related pilot projects and preparatory actions (PPPAs) proposed by Parliament, and calls for successful PPPAs to be built into policy and programmes;
22. Stresses, furthermore, the potential contribution of the Centres of Vocational Excellence, DiscoverEU and European Universities initiatives to the European Education Area; deplures, however, the fact that the Commission's revised MFF proposal of May 2020 – reduced even further by the European Council in July 2020 –

starves the Erasmus+ programme of the necessary funding to deliver these flagship initiatives without impacting on core parts of the programme, particularly the expansion of learning mobility opportunities and making the programme more inclusive;

23. Points out that a range of Union funding programmes can support education policy; calls on the Commission to prioritise targeted investments in digital infrastructure and equipment for educational establishments and learners in order to enable distance and online learning, with specific reference to digital devices and internet access in remote and rural areas; highlights that the Connecting Europe Facility, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the European Regional Development Fund should be used for that purpose;
24. Underlines that high-quality education systems provide the foundation for the EU's global competitiveness, and recalls that well-functioning education and training systems require high levels of public investment; highlights, in this respect, that ambitious policies without the corresponding funding in place lack credibility; deeply regrets that the programmes subject to budgetary cuts in the political agreement on the next MFF reached at the July European Council include specifically those that support education and training policies – notably Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and the European Social Fund Plus; reiterates its call for the Erasmus+ budget to be tripled compared with the budget in the 2014-2020 MFF; calls on the Member States to make ambitious use of funds available through the recovery plan to drive investment in education; encourages the Member States to significantly increase public spending on education;
25. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.