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**Education in Europe**

**IN FOCUS**

**Towards a True European  
Education Area by 2025**

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## Summary

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This paper sets out ways to reform European education systems to ensure that they equip Europeans with a forward-looking set of key competences that prepares them for the workplace, but also helps to create a European identity. It argues that education and training—enhanced through mobility, transnational cooperation and structural reforms—are critical to boosting individual, economic and societal resilience; providing both basic and high-level skills and competences; reducing inequalities; promoting entrepreneurial mindsets; fostering inclusive, stable and democratic societies; and making a success of migration and globalisation. Furthermore, education should help to empower young people to engage with and shape the future of a Europe of democracy, solidarity and inclusion. The ultimate goal is to build a true European Education Area by 2025, which would, inter alia, improve students' mobility, prepare the ground for the mutual recognition of diplomas and boost language learning.

**Keywords** Education – European Commission – European Union



# Introduction

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The debate about the future of Europe is in full swing, and the role of education in building this future is now widely recognised. Education is critical to boosting resilience at the individual, economic and societal levels. It empowers people, enabling them to lead independent lives, build communities and shape the future. That is why, in November 2017, the European Commission presented a Communication on *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture*, which set out ambitious goals for our cooperation in these fields at the EU level.<sup>1</sup> Shortly afterwards, at the beginning of 2018, the Commission presented the concrete steps that it would take to support and work with EU member states to reform Europe's education systems.<sup>2</sup> These measures are tackling the digital dimension in teaching and learning, establishing key competences for today and tomorrow, and finding ways to ensure that our education systems become more inclusive and transmit our shared European values. Carrying out these steps will help us work towards a future where education delivers for children and young people from all backgrounds. This will equip them with the skills they need to seize opportunities and make the most of their lives.

More initiatives will follow. Our goal is to build a true European Education Area by 2025. Our plans have been discussed and endorsed by EU leaders. They have recognised that high-quality education and training are essential to building a more united, more competitive and more democratic Europe. The right to high-quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning is the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which was proclaimed at the Social Summit in Gothenburg in November 2017.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, at the December 2017 European Council, heads of state and government expressed their willingness to do more to support the roles that education and culture play in building inclusive and cohesive societies, and in sustaining European competitiveness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Strengthening European Identity Through Education and Culture*, Communication, COM (2017) 673 final (14 November 2017), accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-strengthening-european-identity-education-culture\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-strengthening-european-identity-education-culture_en.pdf) on 10 January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, 'New Measures to Boost Key Competences and Digital Skills, As Well As the European Dimension of Education', Press Release, IP/18/102 (17 January 2018), accessed at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-18-102\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-102_en.htm) on 18 January 2018.

<sup>3</sup> EU, *European Pillar of Social Rights* (16 November 2017), accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf) on 10 January 2018.

<sup>4</sup> European Council, 'European Council meeting (14 December 2017): Conclusions', EUCO 19/1/17 (14 December 2017), accessed at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/32204/14-final-conclusions-rev1-en.pdf> on 10 January 2018.



# Current challenges

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Education has moved to the top of the political agenda because we are living in a society in which ever-faster change is the only certainty. Education is crucial to surviving and thriving in that changing world. It is no longer sufficient to equip young people with a fixed set of skills or knowledge. They need to develop resilience—the ability to adapt to change and to turn challenges into opportunities. Many of today’s school children will work in job types that do not even exist yet. And they have to be prepared to meet a rising tide of challenges, such as climate change, resource scarcity, accelerating technological change and hyper-connectivity, and increasing demographic imbalances. The question is whether the education they are receiving is preparing them sufficiently to face these trends and take control of their lives.

In a context of rising populism, alternative facts, marginalisation and violent extremism, we need our education and training systems to help young people learn to exercise their democratic rights and live with their fellow citizens, as well as to distinguish between fact and fiction and strengthen a positive sense of belonging. Yet, despite the evidence for the crucial importance of a high-quality education, the data tells us that Europeans are not top education performers, and, alarmingly, that things are getting worse, especially for the most disadvantaged. Many member states have made progress in bringing down the share of those dropping out of school without a diploma to our European headline target of 10% by 2020.<sup>5</sup> But too many young people still leave education or training without adequate qualifications. The 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study shows that member states have moved further away from the benchmarks in basic skills that they want to achieve by 2020. Instead of heading towards a target of 15% of low achievers among 15 year olds, the numbers are up compared to 2012, hitting 22.2% in mathematics, 20.6% in science and 19.7% in reading.

This means that around one in five young people in the EU are not reaching the baseline level at which they are able to tackle tasks that require at least a minimal ability and disposition to think autonomously. As a result, these young people are more likely to face significant, lifelong obstacles to social inclusion and employability. At the same time, the share of pupils achieving very good results in Europe is relatively low: even the EU member states that are doing best are being outperformed by advanced Asian countries.

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission, *Europe 2020: A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, Communication, COM (2010) 2020 final (3 March 2010), 11, accessed at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:2020:FIN:EN:PDF> on 10 January 2018.



Improving basic skills must be part of a broader strategy to help young people develop the wide range of key competences—including transversal skills such as communication, problem-solving and team work—that they will need to do well in life. An analysis of the PISA 2015 data has shown that countries that invest in high-quality education, including extra-curricular activities and a broad approach to competences development, have improved achievement levels in basic skills.

Since 2006, the European Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning has supported countries in reforming their curricula.<sup>6</sup> The Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation on Key Competences, which I presented on 17 January, updates this tool and sets out ways in which member states, with the Commission's support, can work to improve these key competences that are so vital to Europe and Europeans.<sup>7</sup> This includes a stronger focus on entrepreneurship, as well as on science, technology, engineering and mathematical competences. It also encourages greater efforts to improve literacy, communication and language skills, thus responding to the challenges of today's multilingual and culturally diverse societies.

People's socio-economic status still plays a major role in deciding how well they do in education systems and societies overall, and is gaining in importance in the face of rising inequalities. Another important issue which represents a growing challenge for many member states is the successful integration of refugees and migrants into their societies. However, there are also countries that have achieved high levels of quality and inclusiveness in education—such as Finland and Estonia. This shows that smart education policies can help to address these stark variations caused by social background. It is thus a prime goal for education policy to ensure that young people all over Europe receive a high-quality education, independent of where they live, who they are or where they come from.

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<sup>6</sup> European Parliament and Council, 'Recommendation 2006/962/EC on key competences for lifelong learning', OJ L394 (30 December 2006), 10, accessed at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32006H0962&from=EN> on 11 January 2018.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, 'Proposal for a Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning', COM (2018) 24 final (17 January 2018), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/recommendation-key-competences-lifelong-learning.pdf> on 18 January 2018.



# Need for digital and entrepreneurial skills

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The digital revolution is dramatically changing the way Europeans live, work and study. Whilst this offers tremendous opportunities, there are also significant risks.<sup>8</sup> In the future, 90% of jobs will require some level of digital skills. But only 56% of Europeans have 'basic' digital skills and can participate in our increasingly digital world. The remaining 44% of Europeans may not be able to fully grasp digital opportunities, or understand why or how the digital transformation is affecting their job, income or social interactions.<sup>9</sup> For Europe to maintain its most competitive edge—a highly skilled and educated workforce—we need to do better at teaching digital competences to Europeans of all ages. This is also critical to enabling people to participate fully in society and to use new technologies confidently and safely, actively shaping this new world rather than simply consuming content online.

The Digital Education Action Plan which I presented in January sets out concrete ways in which education systems can make better use of innovation and digital technology, and looks at the range of digital competences needed for life and work in an age of rapid digital change.<sup>10</sup> For example, the Commission is developing a new self-assessment tool for digitally capable schools, called SELFIE, to help schools and vocational education and training institutions use digital means more effectively in teaching.<sup>11</sup> We will also reinforce our efforts to promote coding and to get more girls interested in science and information and communication technology.

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<sup>8</sup> M. Curtarelli, V. Gualtieri, M. S. Jannati and V. Donlevy, *ICT for Work: Digital Skills in the Workplace*, ECORYS and Danish Technological Institute for the European Commission, 30-CE-0676076/00-14 (Brussels, 2016), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/ict-work-digital-skills-workplace> on 30 January 2018.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, 'How Digital Is Your Country? Europe Improves but Still Needs to Close Digital Gap', Press Release, IP/17/347 (3 March 2017), accessed at [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-347\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-347_en.htm) on 30 January 2018.

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, *Digital Education Action Plan*, Communication, COM (2018) 22 final (17 January 2018), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/digital-education-action-plan.pdf> on 18 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, 'Self-Assessment Tool for Digitally Capable Schools (SELFIE)' (2017), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomporg/selfie-tool> on 11 January 2018.



# High-quality school education for all

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While reforms of school education are needed to raise competence levels, we also have to do more to help schools promote equity and social fairness, and keep up with technological and digital change.

Evidence from member states tells us that there are three main areas where action is needed to ensure excellent schools are the norm, and not a privilege available to a lucky few. The first is raising the quality and inclusiveness of schools, by enabling them to support all learners in their competence development and enhancing learning by being open to new forms of cooperation. Second, the quality of school education depends on those who are working to educate our children. Successful countries are investing in excellent teachers and school leaders by making their careers attractive to the best candidates, by encouraging continuous professional learning and cooperation among staff, and by supporting school leadership in its key role of providing quality education. The third area is strengthening the governance of school education systems to make them more effective, equitable and efficient by improving the use of resources and by combining school autonomy with effective quality assurance.

## Higher education

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Going beyond the core skills and competences that young people need, higher education plays a unique role. Demand for highly skilled, socially engaged people is both increasing and changing. In the period up to 2025, half of all jobs are projected to require high-level qualifications.<sup>12</sup> High-level skills gaps already exist. Driven by digital technology, jobs are becoming more flexible and more complex. Europe also needs more high achievers who can develop the cutting-edge technologies and solutions on which our future prosperity depends. In parallel, countering the growing polarisation of our societies and distrust of democratic institutions requires everyone—including higher education staff and students—to engage more with the communities around them and promote social inclusion and mobility.

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<sup>12</sup> Cedefop, 'Jobs and Skills in Europe: Outlook Variable' (2015), accessed at <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/press-and-media/press-releases/jobs-and-skills-europe-outlook-variable> on 1 February 2018.



# Education to promote common values

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Education is not just about Europe's competitiveness. It is an essential means to shape a future based on people and values. Terrorist attacks in several EU member states in recent years, as well as evidence of rising populism, have put the spotlight on the need to reinforce EU citizens' understanding of and commitment to our common values. The vital role that education has to play in this was highlighted in one of the first EU-level responses, the Paris Declaration of 17 March 2015 on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education.<sup>13</sup> A lack of awareness of the functioning of the EU, as well as insufficient knowledge of the geographical, historical and socio-cultural diversity of its member states—and its people—hinders the emergence of a common sense of belonging among European citizens.

Education at all levels and from an early age plays a pivotal role in promoting and teaching common values, and ensures social inclusion by providing every child with a fair chance to succeed. Finally, it provides the opportunity for individuals to become active and critically aware citizens, and enables the emergence of a European dimension of teaching that fully respects the principle of subsidiarity. Our education and training systems need to equip young Europeans with abilities that will help them throughout their lives—not just in the workplace, but as engaged and well-informed citizens who are active in their communities and participate in democratic life. A public consultation in summer 2017 attracted over 1,100 replies. Virtually all respondents agreed that education should help young people to 'understand the importance of and adhere to shared values' and that the EU should help member states in this task.<sup>14</sup>

This is the background to our third proposal put forward in January, for a Council Recommendation on common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching.<sup>15</sup> As part of this, for example, we will work

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<sup>13</sup> European Commission, 'Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Through Education', Informal meeting of EU education ministers on 12 February 2015 (Paris, 17 March 2015), accessed at [https://euroclio.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/citizenship-education-declaration\\_en.pdf](https://euroclio.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/citizenship-education-declaration_en.pdf) on 11 January 2018.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, *Public Consultation on Promoting Social Inclusion and Shared EU Values Through Formal and Non-Formal Learning: Overview of Results* (2017), 4, accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/results-citizenship-consultation\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/results-citizenship-consultation_en.pdf) on 11 January 2018.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, 'Proposal for a Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching', COM (2018) 23 final (17 January 2018), accessed at <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/recommendation-common-values-inclusive-education-european-dimension-of-teaching.pdf> on 18 January 2018.



to include more teachers and schools in the e-Twinning platform—already the biggest teachers’ network in the world—and to support their activities, so that they can make contact with and learn from their counterparts in other participating countries. This is vital because it enables them to experience first-hand what it is to be European and to develop the European dimension of their identities.

## The role of the EU

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Addressing the many challenges that Europe faces requires reforms. This is a task for member states based on the principle of subsidiarity. But the EU has an important role in supporting member states, through data analysis, evidence-sharing, identifying good practices, offering opportunities to exchange experiences and for mutual learning, and ensuring that attention is focused on the issues that matter. This type of voluntary cooperation offers added value to member states in making informed decisions.

The EU can help member states that want support for their reform efforts. In particular, the EU offers financial and technical support, notably through Erasmus+,<sup>16</sup> the European Structural and Investment Funds, and the Structural Reforms Support Service. But the Commission and EU member states agree that more can and must be done. Diversity is a hallmark of the European education systems, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. At the same time, member states have a shared interest in improved educational outcomes. To make high-quality education for all a reality, all available tools, at both the national and EU levels, should be fully exploited.

Our Communication on *Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture* set out ambitious plans for the coming years.<sup>17</sup> It resulted in the European Council conclusions of 14 December 2017, in which EU leaders called for the agenda discussed in Gothenburg to be taken forward.

To this end, I hosted the first ever European Education Summit on 25 January in Brussels, where EU education ministers, practitioners and stakeholders, and business leaders held discussions on the theme of ‘Laying the foundations of the European Education Area: For an innovative, inclusive and values-based education’. The Commission’s goal is to work towards

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<sup>16</sup> Erasmus+ is the EU’s programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe. Its budget of €14.7 billion for the period 2014–20 will provide opportunities for over four million Europeans to study, train, gain experience and volunteer abroad.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, *Strengthening European Identity Through Education and Culture*.





a Europe where learning, studying and undertaking research are not blocked by borders; in which skilled and resilient citizens are employed in good-quality jobs, contribute to growth and innovation, and feel empowered to shape their communities; and where people share a strong sense of European identity and feel connected to a common cultural heritage. We are calling for mutual recognition between member states of school-leaving and higher-education diplomas and study periods abroad; and we want to help create an environment in which universities can cooperate seamlessly across borders.

Building on the success of the last 30 years, the Commission aims to make learning mobility a reality for all. By boosting funding for the successor to Erasmus+ after 2020, the Commission's goal is to at least double the number of participants, including pupils, students, trainees, apprentices and teachers. I also want Erasmus+ to reach out even more effectively to disadvantaged learners, and make student mobility easier with the support of an EU student card.

Given the vital importance of good quality and affordable early childhood education and care in breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage, the Commission will take action to support this sector. We will also help member states to develop a teaching profession that is based on professionalism and collaboration, and attracts the best possible candidates for the challenging and important task of teaching. Additionally, we have made proposals to help member states boost skill levels, including basic, language, digital, entrepreneurial and transversal skills and competences, as well as to help them promote lifelong learning.<sup>18</sup>

In moving towards the European Education Area, the Commission will propose Council Recommendations in 2018 on cross-border access to higher education; on improving language learning, including a benchmark for linguistic competences; and on a quality framework for early childhood education and care.

It will also table proposals for the next generation of funding programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, support networks of universities across the EU through Erasmus+ strategic partnerships, and start work towards a European statute to eliminate the administrative and regulatory barriers that hinder the creation of cross-border universities.

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<sup>18</sup> European Commission, 'New Measures to Boost Key Competences and Digital Skills'.



## Conclusion

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Education and training, enhanced through mobility, transnational cooperation and structural reforms, are critical to boosting resilience; providing both basic and high-level skills and competences; reducing inequalities; promoting entrepreneurial mindsets; fostering inclusive, stable and democratic societies; and making a success of migration and globalisation. Europe's education and training systems need to give people a forward-looking set of key competences to prepare them for the workplace, but also to help them play their role in creating a European identity. Education should help empower young people to engage with and shape the future of a Europe of democracy, solidarity and inclusion. And these opportunities must be accessible to all. I am working with member states and educational institutions to reach these goals.

## About the author

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**Tibor Navracsics** is the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport at the European Commission. He has previously served as Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Public Administration and Justice.



# Credits

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