

Et 2020 – European Education System on the Border Between Globalization, Technology and Revivment of the Identitary Creativity

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Abstract

Education is perceived, by the developed societies, as the key element of progress and welfare, being able to empower new generations with knowledge and skills aimed to contribute to the evolution of the world we live in. Designed as a political, economic, but, above all, social project, the European Union supports its member states in their attempts to increase both the quality and the accessibility of education, by setting common goals and designing common instruments to achieve them. However, the process of modernizing the European system of education is not an easy one, nor can it be concluded in a short period of time. This is the reason why, for several decades, the European institutions have released a number of official documents meant to create the framework for an education system that would match the challenges and opportunities of the globalized world we live in. The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss the ways in which the national management of the education system provided by the governments of the Member States is complemented by the tools provided by the common European institutions. In order to achieve this, we will highlight the main issues tackled by previous documents, along with the results of such policies, focusing on Education and training 2020 (ET 2020).

Keywords: European Union, institutions, policy, education, member states

Introduction

For centuries, Europe has been regarded as the cradle of culture, education and creativity, housing the world`s oldest education institutions. Along with the creation and development of the European Union, policies have been issued aiming to create a more unitary and highly performing education system. “Education and training are key elements in the economic and social cohesion” (Ilie Goga, 2014: 215). The main part of the European institutions in this task is to design the necessary instruments which can be used to set these policies in practice (Șerban, Ilie, 2014), as well as to

supervise the ways in which the member states can respond to the requests of cooperation in the field of education.

By observing the key documents issued by the European Union in this matter, we can examine the ways in which the diversity of the member states` systems brings opportunities and value, as well as the attempts made to design a cooperation framework in the fields of education and training, in order to provide benefits and support for the Member States. Such documents have been issued for specific time frames, the current one, Education and training 2020 (ET 2020), being the one we aim to focus our analysis on.

It took 30 years of cooperation, from the formal adoption of the first Community action program on education in February 1976, for such recognition of the importance of education and training to be expressed as clearly as this at the highest level of the Union (European Commission, 2006: 21). During these years, several results have been achieved, thus coming to a phase of current cooperation that was not obvious at the beginning of the common framework. For example, programs such as the Erasmus, which is now one of the flagships of the Community`s work, did not come to exist in the form we know it until recently, or the fact that in the initial European Coal and Steel Treaty of 1951 education was not even regarded as a specific topic, prove that the initial interest in tackling these fields was minimum. However, 30 years later, the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, brought along a new approach, considering education as one of the major elements in creating social and economic development.

In the “Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’)” (Official Journal of the European Union, 28.05.2009), it is emphasized that education and training have a “crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and in the years ahead”. Also, the conclusions state that “efficient investment in human capital through education and training systems is an essential component of Europe's strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs that lie at the heart of the Lisbon strategy, at the same time as promoting personal fulfillment, social cohesion and active citizenship”.

What has been done so far?

In order to promote the development and increase the quality of the education and training systems, the European Union has designed two different types of instruments: first of all, there have been issued a series of policies encouraging the EU countries to exchange examples of good practice in order to develop their national education systems; secondly, a

substantial program funding and facilitating exchanges, networks and mutual learning between schools, universities or training centers, as well as between the political authorities responsible for these areas in the different Member States, has been created (European Commission, 2006: 107).

A historical overlook reveals the ways in which European education and training policies evolved during the decades since the initial start of cooperation within the institutional frame of the European Communities. Thus, from 1971 until the end of the 1980s, European educational policy was characterized by an approach based primarily on economic growth (Munoz, 2015: 27). This first period was characterized by the fact that educational policies were, first of all, meant to promote vocational training among European countries, in order for them to achieve higher rates of economic growth through professional qualifications. Also, one of the main characteristics of this era is that education was used, on European level, as a tool to support economic growth more than in its cultural and social dimensions (Sauron, 2010). Since, after the opposition of the European countries during the Second World War, economic integration was preferred to social and political integration, all the policies issued by European institutions had to be aimed in this direction, of creating a common area of welfare. The national and historical differences were set aside, aiming to ensure a more unitary industrial and economic union of states, among which conflicts would become, if not impossible, at least undesired.

The first program of the European Union aiming to improve the education system was adopted in July 1987 - the COMETT program, designed to stimulate contacts and exchanges between universities and industry. After the successful implementation of this program, the Erasmus inter-university contacts and cooperation scheme was implemented, also providing European students with the opportunity to benefit from an international mobility (as, in 1989, did the "Youth for Europe" program, the EU's first youth exchange support scheme). Although all these programs were adopted by the Member States, they would not have been implemented without the considerable support from the European Parliament, offering including budgets before the legal instruments had been adopted.

The main responsibility in the field of education within the European Union belongs to the Member States, while the common institutions merely have a supporting role. Art. 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that the Community "shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States, through actions such as promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programs, establishing networks, exchanging information or teaching languages of the European Union. The Treaty also

contains a commitment to promote life-long learning for all citizens of the Union”.

Furthermore, the EU has developed several programs funding educational, vocational and citizenship-building initiatives, meant to support European citizens and mostly those involved in the educational activities, to take advantage of the opportunities which the EU offers its citizens to live, study and work in other countries. Such an example is the Erasmus program, which provides students with the logistic and financial aid to take part in inter-university exchanges and mobility.

Another example of important policies undertaken by the European Union is the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). On June 19, 1999, the ministers of education from 29 European countries met in Bologna, Italy, to debate and endorse an important strategy related to higher education, which later on became effective (Munoz, 2015: 30-31). The document issued was named the Bologna Declaration, creating “an important and irreversible process of harmonizing the various European systems of higher education” (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The original Bologna Declaration agreed to biennial ministerial follow-up meetings to discuss strategies to solve convergence problems. The European Higher Education Area came into force in 2010, setting six main directions of action:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (grade/post grade)

- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate

- Establishment of a system of credits (European Credit Transfer System—ECTS)

- Promotion of mobility with particular attention to students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff

 - Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance

 - Promotion of the necessary European dimension in higher education.

We argue that it is important to underline the fact that the Bologna Declaration was not issued, nor did it create an instrument designed or used exclusively by the European Union Member States, among the 29 initial signatories being representatives of European non-EU countries. However, this document has a major impact and is interconnected with several European educational programs and policies (Șerban, Ilie, 2014).

Following intense debates among the representatives of the Member States, at the Stockholm Summit in 2001, the Lisbon Strategy was ratified. Its provisions in the field of educational and training included the adoption of a set of benchmarks to measure and compare educational development among European countries (Valle, 2006). The procedure created to ensure the proper application of these decisions includes annually reports to the

European authorities and publishing in the *Lisbon Objectives in Education and Training* series. The information gathered was used in order to reshape some of the existing programs, such as the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Youth programs, which eventually ended in 2006. The Integrated Programs then gave way to the former Integrated Plan (2007-2013), or The Lifelong Learning Program, which included, among its main objectives, the development, mutual exchange, cooperation and mobility among education systems so that they become a world-quality reference in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy (Valle, 2006). This new platform was considerably larger than the initial design, and included several programs covering different age and skill groups: the Comenius (primary and secondary education), Erasmus (higher education), Leonardo Da Vinci (vocational training), Grundtvig (adult education), and Jean Monnet (European integration in the academic world) programs (Valle, 2006).

As stated above, starting with 2000, the EU Member States have begun to take common actions aiming to design and achieve specific goals in the field of education and training, due to the awareness of the importance of these sectors in attaining several social and economic objectives. The common actions include, among others, sharing examples of good policy practice, taking part in Peer Learning activities, setting benchmarks, or tracking progress against key indicators, but they, however, not exclude the national sovereignty issuing specific Education policies. This strategy is referred to as the Education and Training 2020 program (ET2020), which is an update of the Education and Training 2010 program. The European Union is also a partner in various inter-governmental projects, including the Bologna Process, whose purpose is to create a European higher education area by harmonizing academic degree structures and standards as well as academic quality assurance standards throughout EU Member States and in other European countries (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area ESG, 2015).

ET 2020 - European policies in the Field of Education and Training

As stated above, the Lisbon Strategy had a major impact on European educational policy, acknowledging the fact that Europe's education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. Their task, in the globalized world, is, as the Council states, to "offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people, unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change". In order to achieve these goals, this approach was targeted on three main directions: the development of local learning centers, the promotion of new basic skills, in

particular in the information technologies, and increased transparency of qualifications (Council of the European Union, 2000).

In the Communication issued after the Lisbon Spring Summit in March 2000 (Presidency Conclusions, 2000), the Heads of State and Government of the European Union defined a series of areas where improvements in education and training were needed, and the Ministers of Education of the Member States were required to analyze the future of education systems and how they served citizens: "The European Council asks the Council (Education) to undertake a general reflection on the concrete future objectives of education systems, focusing on common concerns and priorities while respecting national diversity, with a view to ... presenting a broader report to the European Council in the Spring of 2001." (paragraph 27).

Several European institutions, among which the European Council, acknowledge the development and improvements acquired during the previous years, with several programs such as "Education and Training 2010", and express their intention to extend such cooperation for the future. Also, traditional European values, such as diversity, national identity and individual culture are cherished in an integrative system that allows and encourages partners to work together in order to achieve better results. In the Council conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), it is clearly stated, even in the preliminary section, that, "while valuing European diversity and the unique opportunities which this affords, and while fully respecting the Member States' responsibility for their education systems, an updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training — building on the progress made under the 'Education and Training 2010' work program — could further enhance the efficiency of such cooperation and provide continuing benefits and support for Member States' education and training systems up to the year 2020".

Also, the Europe 2020 Strategy includes three models of growth: (a) smart growth based on knowledge and technological innovation, (b) sustainable growth through the efficient use of alternative energy resources, and (c) inclusive growth with high employment and social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2010: 3). So far, according to the Europe 2020 Strategy, the current European Union policy regards education rather as a means to produce graduates capable of producing business benefits in an increasingly competitive market, than promoting democratic social values that are critical and participatory (Munoz, 2015: 36).

The educational frame designed by the Europe 2020 Strategy focuses mainly on training workers and encouraging entrepreneurship, setting as one of the main directions "to promote knowledge partnerships and strengthen

links between education, business, research and innovation, including through the EIT, and to promote entrepreneurship by supporting young innovative Companies” (Council of the European Union, 2010: 11). The provisions of the Europe 2020 Strategy in the field of education are completed by specific documents and policies, such as ET 2020.

Therefore, according to the ‘ET 2020’, “In the period up to 2020, the primary goal of European cooperation should be to support the further development of education and training systems in the Member States which are aimed at ensuring: (a) the personal, social and professional fulfillment of all citizens; (b) sustainable economic prosperity and employability, whilst promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue” (Official Journal of the European Union, 28.05.2009).

Also, the Education and Training 2020 Strategy designs four strategic objectives, aimed to ensure that all the education and training systems in the European member states have a significant increase in the levels of training provided. These objectives are accompanied by a set of indicators of the reference levels of the European average performance:

Strategic objective 1: Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality

Strategic objective 2: Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training

Strategic objective 3: Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship

Strategic objective 4: Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

The conclusions of the Interim Evaluation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) issued in January 2015 state that regarding the operational dimension, “mechanisms have not been systematically put in place to enable ET 2020 to deliver the ‘clear and visible outcomes’ specified in the 2009 Council Conclusions”. Furthermore, the findings of the research reveal that the “use of benchmarks and indicators is not systematically applied, and those that have been devised do not effectively serve as a tool to monitor direct progress in the achievement of the strategic objectives”. Basically, according to this report, the ET 2020 requires the specification of more detailed intended outcomes that are linked to each objective, and that are feasible to both monitor and measure. In addition to these, most of the actions need to be undertaken by the Member States, thus reinforcing their capabilities in developing modern and efficient education systems.

Conclusion

One of the main findings of our research resides in the fact that, at least in the first decades of the European construction, education was

perceived as an instrument to ensure economic growth of the Member States. Cooperation, exchange of expertise, participation in joint training sessions, proved to be efficient practices in improving the current activities in this sector, and the European institutions, through the representatives of the countries, enhanced the cooperation in education, splitting activities into age or education dimensions.

However, such a perspective ignored, at least in part, the fact that one of the key-advantages of education is that it can excellently contribute to building the supra-cultural dimension that European policymakers seek (Munoz, 20015: 23). The latest reports of the European Commission on education acknowledge that this field is of strategic importance for our societies and economic development; starting from the idea that Europe's prosperity and way of life are based upon its greatest asset: its people, education is described as the foundation for social cohesion and creating an open society. Some authors argue that in the knowledge society, quality, excellence, and competitiveness are indispensable factors to economic progress; however, it is equally important to define European educational policy in terms of multiculturalism, pluralism, and interdependence (Munoz, 2015).

Another important conclusion we draw from the analysis of the education and training evolutions is that the real stake-holders in this matter are the national governments. As history proves, modernizing and improving the quality of education systems require reforms, which cannot be concluded in brief periods of time, nor can be decided by external institutions, being rather a continuous effort that need to be undertaken by each of the Member States. Nevertheless, all the 28 European countries share the interest that these reforms make progress and yield results, from which Europe as a whole would benefit, for example in the form of social cohesion and fairness, higher growth, employment, innovation and competitiveness (European Commission, 2016: 9). In the same manner that things evolved so far, the EU can assist the efforts of the Member States, by placing the improvement and modernization of education as a key priority on the EU agenda. Furthermore, targeted action at EU-level can support Member States in their reform efforts and help building a shared agenda to make high-quality education a reality for all.

Education is a means to transfer to citizens important and meaningful cultural elements such as language, values, and traditions (Lafuente et al., 2007: 88). The exclusive economic perspective should be abandoned, building future European education policies around the idea of creating a “melting pot” of European culture.

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