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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Basic skills and the European Education Area: building bridges for the future
- Exchange of views

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the exchange of views at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 11 May 2026.

Basic skills and the European Education Area: building bridges for the future*Presidency steering note**(Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council)*

Our world is changing at an unprecedented pace. The accelerating technological transformation, including the rapid development and use of Artificial Intelligence, demographic challenges, geopolitical, health and climate crises, as well as complex societal and economic challenges, are creating new realities. In light of these changes, the EU is also facing a competitiveness challenge; labour market needs are shifting, calling for adaptability, including the ability to reskill, upskill and respond to evolving job demands.

In this context, education and training systems in Europe have a pivotal role to play in fostering innovation and boosting European competitiveness, addressing societal challenges and enhancing resilience. At the same time, they are increasingly expected to support individuals not only in accessing employment, but also in developing as active, informed and resilient citizens capable of navigating complex and rapidly evolving environments. To do so, education and training systems must continue to evolve, in order to prepare people for a fast-changing future, with transformations in society, the economy and the labour market. To achieve this, there is a need to constantly adjust national strategies, identify policy measures to improve learning outcomes and ultimately boost educational success for all learners.

Within the European Education Area, Member States recognise that education and training systems are central to equipping individuals with the skills and competences needed to thrive in life, the labour market and society. Both the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) and the significant work done so far in the Council on the preparation of the second cycle highlight the constant commitment to quality, equity, inclusion and success for all, and the determination to fully achieve the European Education Area by 2030.

Targets are in place to monitor progress and identify challenges; most notably, the share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15% by 2030, while the share of low-achieving eighth-graders in computer and information literacy should be less than 15% by the same year. Evidence at EU level indicates that progress remains uneven in relation to the targets agreed in 2021. While positive trends can be observed in certain areas, challenges remain in ensuring that all learners acquire what is needed to succeed in a rapidly changing context. This calls for a critical reflection on current policy approaches and strategies, in particular exploring ways to provide more effective support to all learners. High policy ambition needs to better align with effective implementation, in order to ensure better outcomes. In this regard, coordination and coherence of EU initiatives in the area of education and training, in particular those concerning skills and competences, and consistent support for national education and training systems remain a key objective.

Recent EU initiatives have highlighted the need to invest in skills and competences. Focusing on human capital is considered key to the EU's prosperity, its economic resilience and unique social market economy. The Commission communication on the Union of Skills underlines the need for stronger educational foundations and skills for everyone, in order to ensure broad access to education, lifelong learning and employment opportunities, and navigate transitions and crises. The Commission Action Plan on Basic Skills aims both to support Member States in improving outcomes in areas such as literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills, and to contribute to wider objectives linked to competitiveness, resilience and democratic participation.

While there is no single, unified understanding of the term ‘basic skills’, for the purpose of this exchange of views, the focus is put on the fundamental skills that every individual should acquire as a minimum foundation for progression through education and training, lifelong learning, employability and active participation in society. This understanding could imply a broader and more holistic perspective, encompassing also transversal skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, collaboration and civic engagement, which are essential not only in all levels and types of education and training, but also throughout life.

Looking ahead, these foundational skills need not only to be strengthened, but also continuously redefined in the light of emerging realities, in order to effectively support individuals to succeed in life, work, and democratic society and in navigating complexity, uncertainty and change. Education and training systems must anticipate change, adapt foundational learning to new needs, and ensure that learners are equipped both for the challenges of today and for the opportunities of tomorrow. This also requires embedding a lifelong learning perspective across all levels and types of education and training, ensuring that opportunities to upskill and reskill are accessible at all stages of life.

In light of the above, the Presidency invites Ministers to respond to the questions below as part of an exchange of views on the topic. We kindly ask that interventions be limited to a maximum of three (3) minutes.

1. In view of this rapidly evolving landscape, how should national strategies in education and training be adapted to equip learners with the foundational skills they need to succeed today and to navigate the challenges of tomorrow? Are our education and training systems flexible and future oriented enough to deliver on their mission?
2. How can cooperation at EU level, in particular through the European Education Area and in synergy with the Union of Skills, as appropriate, best support this transformation?