

EFEE Statement on the proposal for a Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability

Brussels, 11 May 2021

With the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030 in 2015, environmental sustainability in education has become one of the most prominently debated topics at all levels of governance. The acceleration of social, economic and cultural transformation in societies, triggered by the COVID-19 crisis, however, has revealed a significant gap when it comes to the motivation and the actual implementation of sustainable approaches. What is problematic about this gap is that it consists not only of an infrastructural deficit but also of a significant discrepancy in sustainable literacy, skills and competences in the educational context, which will be crucial to answer the growing needs of re-thinking societal and economic structures beyond the pandemic through the twin-transition.

Consequently, what is at stake for present and future generations is the mission of educational institutions to provide qualitative education, which not only matches the demands for skills and competences of the labor market but also the moral and cultural Zeitgeist of this new era.

The European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), representing 60 institutions responsible for management of education systems at all levels of education from 26 countries, is, thus, enthused that the Commission aims to close the identified implementation gap with a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on education for environmental sustainability. Taking also the role as social partners in education, we welcome this initiative as an opportunity to close the identified gap and uphold the quality of lifelong learning across all educational levels for present as well as future generations of learners.

Taking into consideration the substantial role that the education and training sector will play in the success of Europe's ambitious ecological transition, EFEE invites the European Commission to take the following points into consideration to further improve the initiative:

Objective 1: Integrate environmental issues in national education systems, including at the level of curricula, teacher education, pedagogies and learning environments

One of the major difficulties societies face is that they find it hard to change their individual and collective mindset towards achieving greater sustainability. However, mindset is important as it represents the starting point to trigger behavior changes and consequently, alters the way we interact with our surroundings. In this regard, educational systems have a crucial mission to fulfill by providing people across all levels of lifelong learning not only with skills but also attitudes matching the Zeitgeist and therewith bound needs of our time.

We, therefore, very much welcome the first objective of the initiative to foster new ways of learning and teaching by adapting therewith bound fundamental components such as curricula, teacher education, pedagogies and learning environments in accordance with the need for more sustainable societies. Nevertheless, we would like to strongly underline that a common framework and understanding of basic principles, such as “green skills” and “sustainable mindsets”, is a crucial prerequisite in order to achieve this objective.

In this regard, we would like to emphasize that the integration of environmental issues in national education systems needs to allow sufficient space for flexibility in light of their respective societal framework. This was clearly illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which showcased that cultural, economic and societal needs can change within a short period of time. Against this backdrop, continuous assessment and adaptation of national education systems is of crucial importance in order to make, for instance, pro-active re-skilling and up-skilling possible across all educational levels possible. In light of this, we would like to continue supporting the Commission in its ambition to develop a European competence framework on education for climate change and sustainable development in the framework of the European Green Deal, which assesses the knowledge and competences of learners with regards to sustainability. Moreover, we would like to emphasize that the crucial basis for being able to conduct such assessment and adaptation lies in the continuous dialogue, involving the exchange of opinions, ideas as well as best-practices, amongst stakeholders. As representatives of education and training providers as well as social partners in education, we at EFEE, thereby, take a special role as with our work, we not only foster cooperation between school heads, teachers and students. We furthermore facilitate the communication between the school system with its external community of stakeholders, such as researchers, ministries and NGOs. By strengthening the cross-sectoral collaboration between education stakeholders and those from the labor market in particular, we ensure that a mismatch of needs and expectations with regards to competencies and skills is prevented on both sides.

EFEE’s commitment and interest in promoting education for environmental sustainability can be clearly displayed by our active involvement in the cross-sectoral project on “Green skills in Vet”, which is led by SGI Europe, as well as our engagement in the Education for Climate Coalition. The objective of the former is to map the challenges faced by services of general interest concerning the environmental transition as well as the education sector’s supportive role herein. Regarding the latter, EFEE is pleased that the richness of expertise of education employers and providers that our membership covers from early childhood to adult education, has already

successfully contributed to the design of the Coalition and thus, the promotion of environmental skills and competences in the education sector from the very onset.

We very much welcome the Commission's continuous efforts to strengthen the involvement of social partners, for instance in the framework of the Osnabrück Declaration on vocational education and training for transition to digital and green economies. We encourage the Commission to build up on these joint efforts and continue involving our expertise in the field of environmental education and cross-sectoral collaboration which we have accumulated through our work on these aforementioned exemplary initiatives also in the framework of this new proposal.

Objective 2: Support learners to move from awareness of environmental issues to an understanding of these issues, empowering them to act on a personal and community level

Objective 3: Implement multidisciplinary and participatory approaches in education adapted to understanding and acting on environmental challenges

Every change, no matter how small it may be, starts by engaging people. The civic value education fulfils is that it is people-centric, empowering learners to become well-informed, active citizens who can alter the world around us. In light of this, the question of how to bring environmental sustainability closer to people is bound with the one of how learners can gain therewith bound relevant knowledge and competences the best way possible. As a crucial prerequisite, the need for more flexibility and continuous adaptation with regards to curricula, teacher education and pedagogies, was already mentioned in the previous chapter.

In this regard, not only cross-sectoral but also cross-educational collaboration, including all formal levels of education represents a crucial prerequisite. The aforementioned change of mindset represents a long-term process which is why it is crucial to start creating awareness of environmental issues at an early stage of an individual's learning career. Putting environmental sustainability at the core of lifelong learning should therefore be a fundamental value across all EU education systems. Cross-educational collaboration, starting from early childhood education, is also vital when it comes to the development of sustainable transversal skills, which not only facilitate learners to integrate well into the future labor market but also to take a responsible and active role in future societies. Such transversal skills include problem solving, conflict resolution, consensus building, information management, interpersonal expression, and critical and creative thinking. To foster the development of such skills in a long-term view, we consider it of paramount importance to

strengthen across all educational levels interdisciplinary approaches in teaching and learning, enabling learners to build cognitive bridges across disciplines and curricula.

Moreover, what we consider to be pivotal is to ensure that the voices of educational employers and providers, teaching staff and learners of all formal educational levels are heard and recognized at all levels of governance in order to ensure that no one is left behind on the way to building more sustainable societies through education. This is especially true of already disadvantaged learners, such as migrants or learners with physical or cognitive impairments. Consequently, in the framework of this new proposal, we encourage the Commission to build up existing initiatives and ensure a therewith bound coherence and need-based allocation of funds. Such initiatives include the Council recommendation on Vocational Education and Training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, the Child and Youth Guarantee, Skills Agenda and the new Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Objective 4: Promote a whole-institution approach where sustainability is embedded in all activities, including buildings and facility management, governance, partnerships and community relations

Sustainable and modern learning environments are a crucial prerequisite for ensuring qualitative and inclusive learning and teaching in the future. This includes, on the one hand, that the infrastructure of education institutions becomes more sustainable, and, on the other hand, the adaptation of learning environments to the needs of today's and future students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated in its extremity the unequal access to digital tools and infrastructure, such as high-speed internet, that educational institutions face within and across European countries as well as levels of education. A statistic conducted in the framework of the "2nd Survey of Schools: ICT in Education. Objective 1: Benchmark progress in ICT in schools", published by the European Commission, shows that schools located in northern European countries are "frontrunners regarding the deployment in high-speed access to internet and sustainable infrastructure while those in southern rural areas lack behind". In order to ensure sustainable education in the future, it is therefore crucial to decouple the geographical location of a school from its ability to provide qualitative and inclusive education for every learner. In this regard, we, on the one hand, consider it as of utmost importance to strengthen the dialogue between employers, trade unions, school leaders and others at all levels of governance in order to facilitate peer learning and networking. Furthermore, we encourage the Commission to ensure coherence of already existing financial mechanisms such as the European Regional Development Fund, the European

Social Fund and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. Moreover, to ensure an adequate distribution of these funds on a need-based approach, we enthruse the Commission to conduct a detailed economic mapping of the current state of play with regards to the access of sustainable infrastructure available to schools across European countries and educational levels. Given the diversity of our membership consisting of educational employers from 26 European countries, we encourage the Commission to include us from the earliest stage of such a mapping procedure.

Objective 5: Set out common principles and a shared language on sustainability that could guide implementation at national level and support cooperation and exchange of ideas and best practice at EU level

Objective 6: Strengthen efforts and improve progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

As previously mentioned, developing a shared understanding definition of certain key elements regarding environmental sustainability, including defining terms such as “green skills” or “sustainable infrastructures”, will play a pivotal role in achieving the EU’s climate ambitions. Nevertheless, at the moment the most fundamental obstacle when it comes to the successful promotion of sustainability through education, represents the lack of such a common, universal definition of green skills and competences. This becomes evident, for instance, when looking at the so-called “TVETipedia Glossary” provided by UNESCO. In the light of this, we are delighted that on the international level, UNESCO is deepening its portfolio with regards to Green Skills and Vocational Education and Training within the Education for Sustainable Development: Towards achieving the SDGs framework. As social partners in education, with a substantial and successful history of engaging in dialogue on delicate topics such as environment and climate, we stress the need to actively include sectoral social partners in the setting-up of these common principles. Not only will social partners play an integral role in the implementation of these principles at the national and regional level, but they will furthermore set the groundwork for the exchange of best practices and peer learning activities across the EU. Against this background, we therefore urge the Commission to take a bottom-up approach with regards to the creation of this shared language, as many initiatives already exist at the local, regional and national level. Additionally, we encourage the Commission to promote the sharing of best practices by supporting the European sectoral social partner in education in their facilitation of these activities as well as to continue including them in European networks regarding environmental sustainability, most importantly the Education for Climate Coalition.



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