

The European Community and education



European File

Millions of Europeans, whether as pupils, students, parents or teachers, have an interest in education. Despite a small falling off in numbers since the early 1980s, the education systems of the Community Member States contain 58 million young people and nearly 3.5 million teachers. The United Nations has declared 1985 International Youth Year. It is therefore an appropriate time to study the educational role of the European Community.¹

Origins of Community involvement

Educational cooperation between Member States is a logical part of the construction of the European Community. It can help to bring people closer together and improve their living and working conditions. The economic recession and high level of unemployment makes such cooperation more important than ever. Education policy, under present conditions, has acquired a new economic, social and cultural significance. Community institutions are playing an active part in educational developments, even though the Community Treaties make scant explicit reference to education.

Community cooperation in the educational field began about 10 years ago. It was launched in 1974 when the European Commission presented its first outline action programme. It was stressed at this time that Community action must respect the varied educational traditions of Member States and should not attempt to standardize national teaching structures, methods or syllabi. In the same year an education committee was set up comprising representatives of the Commission and Member States to prepare and coordinate the implementation of an action programme.

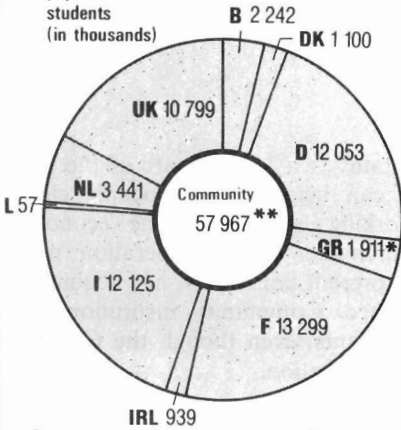
As a result, in February 1976, the Council of Ministers and a meeting of Education Ministers were able to adopt a six point Community programme: improved cultural and vocational training for migrant workers and their children; better mutual understanding of the different European educational systems; the collection of basic documentary information and statistics; cooperation in higher education; the improvement of foreign-language teaching; the equality of opportunity of access to all forms of education throughout the Community. In December 1976 this programme was extended to include measures to improve the vocational training of young people and to ease their transition from school to the workplace. Youth unemployment has made these objectives even more important, as underlined by a number of Council resolutions in 1980 and 1982, and action to promote youth employment urged by Heads of State or Government at their Stuttgart summit in June 1983.

The European Parliament had also played a major role in tackling educational issues, through use of its budgetary powers and influential resolutions on youth training and language teaching and links between private and State education.

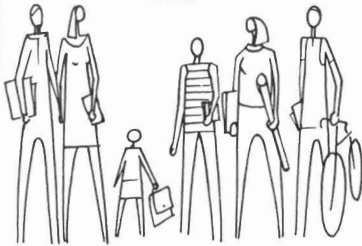
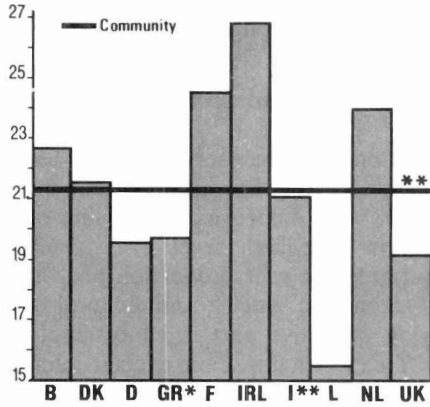
¹ This file updates and replaces our No 18/79.

School and university education in the Community (1982/83 academic year)

1. Total number of pupils and students (in thousands)

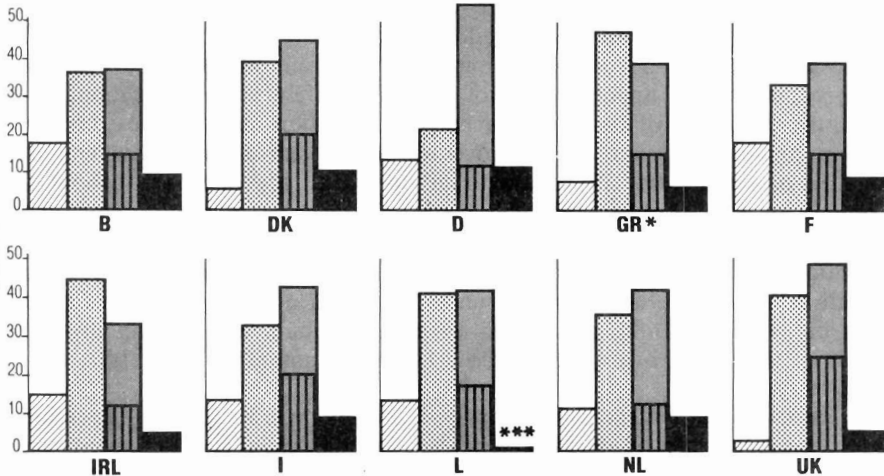
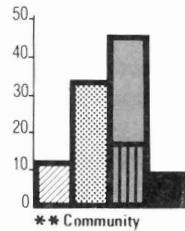


2. Proportion of pupils and students in total population (in %)



3. Proportions by level of education (in %)

- Pre school level
- First level
- Second level
- Of which, second stage
- Third level



* 1980/81. ** Estimates.

*** Most Luxembourg students go to higher education establishments in other Member States.

Source: Eurostat.

1. Increasing cooperation and information exchanges between education systems

The diversity of the education systems in the Community is a source of wealth which must be preserved. But it is in everyone's interest to draw on the experience and achievements of neighbouring countries. Community action aims to improve mutual awareness of different forms of education and to encourage exchanges between national, regional and local officials. Significant results have been obtained:

- The European Commission has developed an extensive range of contacts with national education services, teachers' unions and associations, university principals and parents.
- The availability of information and documentation on developments in education policy in Member States has been considerably improved, thanks to the creation of the Eurydice information exchange network in September 1980. This system allowed national and Community officials to build up a fund of information on education policies through the exchange of questions and answers. Since 1982, this network, the first of its kind in Europe, has pursued an active policy of diffusing information to a wider public.
- Informal contacts between teachers of geography, economics and other subjects have been considerably improved, through conferences and meetings on subjects such as social change, demographic problems, educational methods for different age groups and the adaptation of teaching methods and materials to modern needs.
- Study visits organized with Community financial assistance — more than 1 000 grants to date — have placed teachers in direct contact with teaching developments in other Member States.

In addition, the European Commission works closely with international organizations which take an interest in educational problems, such as the OECD, Unesco and above all the Council of Europe.

2. Student and teacher mobility

Travel is part of the education of young people. Students should be given a chance to study outside their own country. Universities have long set an example of cultural and educational collaboration across European frontiers. But there are still many barriers to the movement of students within the Community: financial problems, difficulties of integration into a foreign society and doubts surrounding the recognition of foreign diplomas.

- Since 1976 the European Commission has encouraged the abolition of restrictions on numbers and financial and administrative discrimination

against foreign students and a relaxation of the rules on academic recognition of diplomas and the length of study periods abroad. Heads of State or Government gave new commitments in this area at their Fontainebleau summit in June 1984. A network of information centres dealing with problems of academic recognition already exists to give detailed advice to parents and students.¹ There is also a widely read students' guide, published and frequently updated by the Commission, which has greatly improved access to information on higher education courses in other Member States.

- The Community subsidizes 'common study programmes' which improve cooperation between universities in different Member States by promoting visits and exchanges between teachers and students. This idea has been a great success. Since 1976 about 400 study programmes have been launched involving more than 500 centres of higher education.
- The Commission gives grants to higher education teaching staff for short study visits to improve their knowledge of other education systems.

3. Education in European current affairs

The interest of young people in European affairs is such that 70% of them complain that they are insufficiently informed about Community developments. As electors or future electors of the European Parliament, they ought not to leave school without a minimum understanding of Community issues and the way of life in other Community countries. The European Commission therefore:

- Encourages plans to promote European study courses in schools and helps European associations active in this area;
- Provides literature through its information services specially written for young people and distributed through schools;
- Supports a range of European documentation centres and European study institutes set up by universities.

In addition, the European University Institute in Florence, opened in 1976, provides courses for postgraduate students researching the historical, economic, legal and socio-political background of European developments and institutions.

4. Foreign language teaching

Encouraging a knowledge of Community languages is clearly a key element in the construction of Europe. It eases the free movement of people – a priority

¹ For the United Kingdom: National Equivalence Information Centre, British Council, 10 Spring Gardens, London SW1A 2BN; for Ireland: Department of Education, Headquarters Section 3, Marlborough Street, Dublin 2.

Community objective – as well as promoting cultural, economic, technical and scientific cooperation between Member States. For these reasons European ministers have placed an enormous emphasis since 1976 on the improvement of language teaching. In June 1984, the Member States gave new impetus to this campaign by committing themselves to:

- Encouraging the acquisition of a working knowledge of two languages apart from the mother tongue before the statutory school leaving age;
- Promoting visits by language teachers to the country of the language they teach;
- Creating information centres to provide teachers with data on teaching methods and materials and the experience of other Member States. The European Commission, for its part, is to organize study visits and regular meetings on language teaching methods and practices.

5. The transition from school to working life

When young people leave school between the ages of 14 and 18 they go through a period of rapid transition from childhood, without responsibilities and independent financial means, to adulthood. This period is also important for other reasons: our socio-economic systems are structured in such a way that career choices made at this time are often virtually irreversible; society is moving into an epoch where industry and services are increasingly knowledge-oriented and it is during this period of a person's life that most knowledge and experience is developed; finally, this is the time when lack of privilege makes itself felt most acutely. The sharp rise in youth unemployment (of nearly 13 million jobless in the Community, about 40% are less than 25 years old) has deepened these problems by limiting educational and job opportunities and further undermining the position of the unqualified and underprivileged. To face up to this challenge, the Community hopes to adopt a new approach and new methods.

- A December 1976 resolution outlined a programme of pilot projects which aimed to analyse specific problems and study possible joint solutions. A second programme covered the period 1983-86. The objectives of the two programmes were identical: to encourage young people to obtain professional qualifications, to give them a clearer conception of working life, and to develop their sense of initiative and creativity. Crucial elements in these programmes were close cooperation between all involved in education, the opening up of schools to representatives of trade unions and industry and the achievement of a closer identity between school courses and professional needs. The scale of the 30 pilot projects undertaken in the 10 Community countries ranged from a group of schools to entire administrative regions. Most were district-based, since the first programme emphasized the importance of local initiatives.

- In a June 1983 resolution setting broad guidelines for vocational training in the 1980s, Member States declared their intention of granting a 'social guarantee' up to 1988 to all young people without school or job qualifications. After leaving school young people were to have the opportunity of a programme of at least six months and possibly one year of full-time basic training.

These measures supplemented other Community initiatives designed to combat youth unemployment and extend training programmes through cash aid from the European Social Fund which is to devote 75% of its resources in future to people aged less than 25.

6. Equality of opportunity

Throughout the Community national legislation attempts to ensure equal opportunities for all young people. But a number of practical barriers remain and the Community has acted to try to remove them. The Community is actively promoting equality between girls and boys and is attempting to help the underprivileged to surmount their difficulties.

- *Girls*: the Treaty of Rome and a number of Community directives enshrine the principle of equality of job and training opportunity for men and women, but education and the job preferences of young people are burdened with sexual preconceptions. Girls are under-represented in technical courses, leave education earlier and often aim for so-called 'women's jobs' which carry a high risk of unemployment and low pay.
 - The Community action programme (1982-85) for equality of opportunity for women lays great emphasis on vocational training and guidance. It includes action to diversify the job choices for girls, their training in new technologies and the diffusion of information on their training rights.
 - About 30% of beneficiaries from the European Social Fund training projects are women. The Fund gives priority to the training of women aged less than 25 who wish to take up new professions or jobs where women are traditionally under-represented.
- *Migrants*: from its early days the Community has insisted on the principle of free movement of workers between member countries. There are now 13 million workers in the Community who have sought out jobs in another Member State. They have three million children less than 18 years old who form an increasing proportion of the school population in some countries. The failure rate amongst such children remains high and they often find problems in integrating in schools and society.
 - A 1977 Community directive on the schooling of children of migrant workers asks Member States to set up reception classes, specialized

training for teachers and education in the language and culture of their country of origin. In adopting this directive, Member States gave a political commitment to extend its terms, as far as possible, to the children of migrant workers from non-Community countries.

- Since 1976 the European Commission has financed and coordinated pilot projects on improving reception and teaching methods. Experiments in progress include improvements to teaching materials, the cross-cultural training of teachers, and the integrated teaching of the language and culture of origin. There are also a number of projects to assist the reintegration of children returning to their home countries.
 - The European Social Fund also finances national training programmes for language and specialist teachers.
- *The handicapped:* between 5% and 9% of Community citizens are mentally or physically handicapped to some degree. Handicapped children form a not insignificant proportion of the school population.
- Since 1974 the European Social Fund has helped to finance the vocational training of the handicapped. The international year of the handicapped in 1981 led to a major review of Community action and led to a Council decision to launch a programme for the social integration of handicapped people. This programme covered education in schools and vocational and subsequent training. It is operated by the European Commission action bureau for handicapped people.
 - The Community also supports a series of experimental projects on integration in schools, exchanges between young people and the transition of handicapped young people to working life.
- *The illiterate:* illiteracy is becoming a serious problem in all Community countries. Alongside basic illiteracy there is also a problem with regressive illiteracy or practical illiteracy caused, amongst other things, by the decline in reading brought about partly by new methods of communication such as radio and television. Educationalists are in the forefront of the struggle for literacy even though this social phenomenon has complex origins. In June 1984, European education ministers asked the Commission to organize information exchanges on this issue. They also undertook to:
- Modify teaching practices to help the least-privileged children;
 - Improve writing, reading and communication techniques in primary schools;
 - Provide permanent or travelling libraries for the young;

- Rethink the basic and refresher training of teachers;
- Promote adult anti-illiteracy campaigns;
- Develop tele-teaching with the help of television companies.

7. New information technologies

The new technologies have had a profound impact and demand new skills and behaviour patterns if the social consequences are to be minimized. Education and training must form the bedrock of any strategy designed to strengthen the innovatory capacity of industry in the face of a growing need for highly-qualified personnel. New approaches to basic and continuous training are required. The success of efforts to reshape industrial and research and development policy are at stake. Community action in this area has been based on two Council resolutions of June 1983, concerning the introduction of new information technologies in education and vocational training and the conclusions of the Education and Social Affairs Councils of June 1984 following a Commission communication on technological developments and social change.

- In the education field, attempts are to be made to exchange information in three priority areas:
 - The training of teachers through study visits and exchanges;
 - Cooperation between the education authorities and industry in the computer software field, in conjunction with the Community's Esprit programme for technological research;
 - The use of new technologies in the teaching of science and other courses;
- In the vocational training field, the Community is encouraging studies and exchanges between teaching staff. It is also supporting experimental demonstration projects through the European Social Fund. These projects are aimed at adults and also young people, especially those whose professional qualifications are inadequate or inappropriate and whose job prospects would be boosted by training in the new technologies.
- The Community also intends to encourage cooperation between universities and industry to promote the training and recycling of highly-qualified workers.
- The Community is promoting campaigns to familiarize the general public with the new technologies. A European conference for young people aged from 15 to 19, already advanced in this field, will be organized during 1985, International Youth Year.

Since 1976 the Community has laid solid foundations for an education policy but much remains to be done. In future, Community efforts will concentrate on two areas of immense importance: the transition from school to the workplace, which is part of the struggle against youth unemployment; and the new technologies, whose social impact must be minimized while they offer new employment prospects for Europe by reconquering markets and training the qualified workers needed to restore competitiveness and encourage innovation. In a broader perspective, education policy must strengthen and extend the foundations of European unification. It must contribute to a growing Community awareness and offer young people a more immediate and concrete appreciation of Community involvement in their everyday lives ■

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