

Politiche europee e *re-thinking education*

Intervista ad Androulla Vassiliou¹

di **Giorgio Allulli**

G.A. Could you assess the results achieved by the EU, considering that since the Lisbon Strategy and even before (e.g. the *White Paper* by Jacques Delors) the EU has emphasized the great importance of education for economic growth: what objectives have been achieved? What objectives are still to be achieved? And why? Can you identify the major progresses at European and national level?

A.V. The economic and political context has dramatically changed over recent years, creating new uncertainties and constraints. In response to the worst financial and economic crisis in its history, the European Union has agreed on *Europe 2020*, a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. One of the five *Europe 2020* headline targets concerns education: early school leaving and tertiary attainment.

The crisis has shown the need for structural reforms to sustain future competitiveness and social cohesion. We know that the demand for jobs in the EU requiring only low qualifications is decreasing: the share is expected to fall by around 12 million, from 20% to less than 15% by 2020. Conversely, the share of jobs requiring tertiary qualifications will increase by almost 16 million, from 29% (2010) to 35% in 2020. Some countries already face recruitment bottlenecks for highly qualified jobs.

There is no doubt that investing in education is crucial for creating a strong and innovative Europe where young people can build a successful fu-

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ture for themselves. The Commission has set up four key priorities to make this happen.

Firstly, increasing investment in education can yield immense long-term returns and generate growth and jobs in the EU. However, even before the crisis spending in some member States was close to or below 4% of GDP, while the EU average stood at almost 5% of GDP. In 2012, many European countries or regions have reduced their education budgets by more than 1%. Eight countries (Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, Portugal, United Kingdom – Wales and Croatia) have made cuts amounting to more than 5%, with the negative and unpredictable repercussions which that implies for education quality and standards in those countries.

Secondly, we want to reduce the share of 18-24 year olds leaving education and training prematurely from 14% in 2010 to less than 10% by 2020. In 2012 we saw some progress towards the benchmark when the rate averaged 12,8% across the EU, but there are still considerable differences between countries.

All member States need targeted measures to reach young people at risk of dropping out of school early. Stakeholders from different education sectors and policy areas, as well as parents and local communities, need to work more closely together. There should also be a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention through teacher education, quality early childhood education and second-chance education.

Thirdly, higher education is a powerful driver in a knowledge-intense economy. It provides the highly-qualified scientific workforce that Europe needs to advance research and development and equips people with vital skills and qualifications.

We want to increase the share of 30-34 year olds with a tertiary or equivalent qualification to 40% by 2020. In 2012, the figure was 35,8%. Attainment rates, national targets and levels of ambition vary considerably across countries. Reforms should increase the number of graduates, while maintaining and enhancing the quality of education and research. The involvement of underrepresented groups needs to increase in all member States, including people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, remote locations, ethnic groups and people with disabilities. Access to higher education for adult learners also needs to be improved.

Fourthly, we want to increase the level of skills across Europe. This means reducing the share of low-achievers in basic skills (20% in 2009 vs. a bench-

mark of under 15% by 2020) and increasing participation in early childhood education (92,4% in 2010 vs. a benchmark of 95% by 2020). The current level of 9,1% of adults aged 25-64 participating in lifelong learning is far below the benchmark of 15% to be reached by 2020.

Obstacles to lifelong learning persist: learning opportunities poorly tailored to the needs of the target groups; lack of accessible information and support systems; and inflexible learning pathways (e.g. between vocational education and training and higher education). National targets and strategies, as well as increasing incentives for adult training by companies, would be ways to address these obstacles.

On the positive side, we have increased the transparency of qualifications and promoted mechanisms to better recognize skills obtained outside the education system. These tools and their implementation at national level show that barriers for cooperation between education sectors can be overcome.

Finally, gaining experience abroad strengthens employability and personal development. Education institutions, education and training systems and businesses equally benefit from the resulting new skills, personal contacts and networks. However, only 10%-15% of higher education graduates spend a part of their studies abroad, compared with just 3% of graduates from initial vocational education and training (VET). Member States adopted a new benchmark on learning mobility in November 2011 (20% for higher education, 6% for VET by 2020), so there is a long way to go.

European funding programs have a key role to play. Up to 4 million people could get the chance to study or train abroad with a grant from Erasmus for All, the proposed new EU program for education, training, youth and sport. Master's degree students would also benefit from a new loan guarantee scheme set up with the European Investment Bank Group.

G.A. In some member States, Italy among them, despite the low number of graduates, we witness the phenomenon of 'over-education' and the so-called *brain drain*. How do we combat this and overcome its social and economic effects (unemployment, under-utilization of skills, emigration)?

A.V. As regards tertiary education, Italy continues to underperform with an attainment rate of 21,7% in 2012 for people aged 30-34; that is the lowest in the EU (average is 35,8%). At the same time, we see examples of over-education

which also lead to a significant brain drain. Its main cause is the skills mismatch between education and the labour market needs of the Italian labour market: for instance, in 2011 the unemployment rate for tertiary graduates aged 25-29 was 16% in Italy compared to 10,5% in the euro area.

Italy has already put in place some measures that could help reduce the skills mismatch. Starting from the 2011/12 academic year, 62 higher vocational institutions (Istituti Tecnici Superiori, ITS) have been created to provide two-year tertiary qualifications focused on key sectors of the Italian economy, such as mechanics, ICT, agri-food or energy. Although they still involve a limited number of students, the ITS are potentially relevant in promoting the development of the vocational higher education system and reducing the unemployment rate of graduates. In addition, in January 2013 the government adopted a national system for certification of skills, including the identification and recognition skills obtained outside the formal education system.

However, there is scope for further action against over education and brain drain. In particular, four policy directions could be better exploited: 1) Improving guidance to students regarding career paths; 2) Promoting entrepreneurship education in schools' curricula, in vocational training and in higher education; 3) Promoting innovation in higher education to improve its quality and effectiveness; 4) Fostering cooperation between higher education institutions and enterprises to enhance the relevance of higher education for the labour market.

G.A. In the European Commission's *Rethinking Education* communication you emphasize the objective of creating a first-class system of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe and the 'dual system' is considered the best way to achieve this. However, there are countries, again Italy among them, that have made many attempts to reform their apprenticeship system but without success, so far. What other forms of work-based learning could help build an excellent and attractive VET system?

A.V. The importance of work-based learning in attractive, high-quality vocational education and training (VET) systems is clear. Apprenticeships or 'alternance' systems are the best known models of work-based learning, such as the dual system in Germany and Austria. In-company placements and traineeships are another model, and may be a compulsory or mandatory part of many VET programs. Finally, school-based VET programs can include work-based learn-

ing such as on-site labs, kitchens, practice firms or real-life project assignments. Work-based learning facilitates the transition from learning to work. However, the challenges faced by member States, including Italy, are manifold: how to set up a clear regulatory framework, how to define roles for the different players, and how to ensure that apprenticeships are an integral part of the entire education system?

In order to achieve excellence in VET and/or successfully reform their apprenticeship systems, governments must ensure that curricula are systematically renewed, that teaching and training approaches are modernized and that businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, are actively involved. Moreover, it must be possible for VET to react when the demand for advanced vocational skills grows, also at the regional level. VET also needs to open the door for those who want to access higher education, as well as to allow individuals to re-enter learning to upgrade or update skills.

The current Italian reform aims at enhancing the apprenticeship system and making apprenticeships an attractive and effective entry point for young people in the labour market. One core element of the reform is to strengthen the involvement of social partners, which has been the main challenge so far. This is surely a good path to follow: education should cooperate with the world of work to ensure that taught skills are relevant for businesses. Strong engagement and ownership on the part of employers and trade unions allow a VET system to flexibly adapt to the changing needs of the labour market.

We are happy to see that several member States have launched an initiative in December 2012 that focuses on apprenticeship-type, work-based learning. Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain, in association with the European Commission, signed a memorandum of cooperation on vocational education and training, which will enable them to put in practice concrete projects and exchanges.

The Commission is also developing a new European Alliance for Apprenticeships to improve the quality and supply of apprenticeships and to ensure high-quality apprenticeship-type training and excellence in VET. This initiative will support Member States seeking to set-up or modernize apprenticeship schemes, drawing on successful models and encouraging transnational cooperation. The Alliance will also support national partnerships for apprenticeship-type training.

G.A. The financing of education is a crucial issue in a situation of economic crisis. *Re-thinking Education* aims to encourage companies to invest in education. How is it possible to do this in those Member States in which small businesses are the majority and are reluctant to invest in education?

A.V. The majority of businesses in the European Union today are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). There are more than 20 million SMEs, which represent 99% of all businesses. They are a key driver for economic growth, innovation, employment and social integration. It is also true that, for many SMEs, investment in education and training is difficult. If we want to involve businesses in closer cooperation with education we must include SMEs and understand their specific needs when participating in education. SMEs have limited resources and often insufficient expertise to manage complex rules and regulations.

Governments may put in place measures for companies to invest in training of their employees. Compulsory measures typically oblige companies to allocate a certain percentage of their payroll for training. Voluntary measures, which may also be targeted at certain groups (for example SMEs), provide employers with financial incentives to invest in learning – these can be subsidies or tax incentives, or even clauses that allow companies which cover the costs of training for employees, to retain those employees for a certain time after training in compensation, or ask for a reimbursement, in case employees leave.

It is also important that SMEs are key partners in developing better cooperation between the worlds of education and training and employment. At the local level, cooperation can be very practical, such as seeking synergies with schools or developing small-scale apprenticeship schemes. At a more strategic level they can, for example, through associations of employers, be involved in the discussions around the development or reform of national VET systems, or European exchange of good practice. We have recently organized a workshop on ‘SMEs’ involvement in apprenticeships and work-based learning’ where different types of stakeholders (governments, employers, trade unions, sectorial federations and VET providers) from 15 countries discussed the incentives and support infrastructures which are necessary for SMEs to become partners in apprenticeship-type schemes.

Finally, we need to raise awareness on research findings that investment in training, including for young apprentices, generally brings substantial econom-

ic returns to companies, including SMEs, as for instance in Switzerland and Germany.

G.A. Could you tell us what, in your opinion, are the most critical points today for both European and Italian education policy?

A.V. In its Annual Growth Survey of November 2012, the Commission provided a number of recommendations to member States concerning education and training policies. It urges them to be selective in terms of budgetary cuts and to preserve future growth potential: investment in education should be prioritized and strengthened, while ensuring the effectiveness of this investment. To promote growth and competitiveness, the performance of education and training systems and overall skill levels should be raised, linking the worlds of work and education more closely, for instance by introducing strategic two-year tertiary qualifications. This could help to tap the job potential of expanding sectors, such as the green economy, healthcare and ICT.

To improve employability, in particular of young people, member States should facilitate the transition from school to work by developing quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models, and develop entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, member States should improve access to lifelong learning by strengthening partnerships of public and private institutions involved in the provision, application and up-dating of specific skills.

Education is well represented in the 2012 country-specific recommendations issued in the context of Europe's growth strategy. They relate to the situation of young people, the need to reduce early school leaving and promote access to good quality pre-school and school education, reducing early school leaving rates, but also improving quality, implementing new financing models, the need to bridge the world of work and education (notably in the area of vocational education and training), the situation of disadvantaged groups (including migrants and Roma), as well as sufficient and sustainable funding for education and training.

Member States will present their reports on the implementation of these recommendations this month and the Commission will present its assessment including proposals for new country specific recommendations in May.

Besides the problem of skills mismatch, Italy performs significantly worse than the EU average in terms of early school leaving (17,6% as against an EU

average of 12,8% in 2012), especially in Southern regions and with regard to foreign-born pupils.

Moreover, education in Italy produces rather mixed results in terms of basic skills achievements. Despite recent improvements, the performance of 15 year olds on OECD PISA tests remains poor in Southern regions, while it is in line with, or above, the EU average in Northern regions. The performance of education depends on the teacher profession, currently characterized by a single career pathway with salary progression based on seniority only, limited prospects in terms of professional development, no comprehensive assessment of performance and relatively low salary levels by international standards.

Finally, the vocational education and training system is rather fragmented, and participation of adults in lifelong learning remains low in comparison with the EU average (6,2% as against 9,1% in 2012). This is especially the case for the low-skilled, who would benefit most from further education.

Indeed, the 2012 country-specific recommendations on education for Italy suggested improving the labour market relevance of education, tackling early school leaving and reducing university drop-outs.

G.A. The current difficulties which the eurozone is facing raise issues not only of an economic nature but also of integration, mutual understanding and solidarity between different nations and citizens: in other words, it pushes for the development of a European spirit. Education could play an important role in this context. Don't you think that the European education policy should start dealing with these kinds of cultural and political problems?

A.V. Education is always about personal, social and professional fulfillment. EU education policy is and has always been as much about sustainable economic prosperity and employability, as it is about promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue.

Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship is one of the strategic objectives underlying EU policy co-operation in education and training. We are working for example on facilitating access to education for all European citizens, including those from disadvantaged communities, such as the Roma. The European Commission is helping member States to implement their national Roma integration strategies, which have an important education component. We want to eliminate school segregation and misuse of special needs education,

enforce full compulsory education and promote vocational training, increase enrollment in early childhood education and care, improve teachers' training and raise parents' awareness of the importance of education.

More needs to be done to persuade all stakeholders to address issues of civic competences (citizenship and human rights) as a core feature of our democratic society. Values of integrity, honesty, solidarity and participation in the democratic operation of the national and European institutions must be taught to open the minds of young Europeans to their future responsibilities as citizens.

Together with the Council of Europe, we are launching a promising pilot project which will enable participating countries to implement the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education. The first results will be a substantial contribution to the 2013 European Year of Citizenship.

Furthermore, we have launched the project 'Learning the EU at School' to increase knowledge of the EU. We are working on new methodologies and teaching material to be used in teacher training institutions and schools. Furthermore, we are mapping how EU matters are addressed in schools in the different member States and are collecting a set of good practices which can be used at a broader scale. We presented the results of this study and the individual projects at a conference in Brussels on 25 April 2013. Our goal is to provide tools that encourage critical thinking about the EU.

