



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council conclusions on literacy

*3201st EDUCATION, YOUTH, CULTURE and SPORT Council meeting
Brussels, 26 and 27 November 2012*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"HAVING REGARD TO

1. The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020")¹, which set the goal of diminishing the share of low achievers in basic skills (reading literacy, mathematics and science) to 15% by 2020.
2. The Council Resolution of 20 December 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning², which aims to improve adult literacy and numeracy levels and to broaden learning provision for low-skilled Europeans.

AND RECALLING IN PARTICULAR

The Council conclusions of 19 November 2010 on increasing the level of basic skills in the context of European cooperation on schools for the 21st century³, which reaffirmed Member States' commitment in the context of their reform efforts to address curriculum design and the promotion of literacy across the curriculum, at all levels of education; to foster reading motivation, particularly among boys; to examine the influence of new technologies on children's reading in order to exploit the potential of such technologies for new forms of learning; to provide more support for struggling readers and pupils with a migrant background; to strengthen teacher education related to the acquisition of reading literacy, and to reinforce school ethos.

¹ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, pp. 2-10.

² OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, pp. 1-6.

³ OJ C 323, 30.11.2010, pp. 11-14

P R E S S

DEFINING

Literacy as encompassing both reading and writing competences for understanding, using and critically evaluating different forms of information, including written, printed, electronic texts and images, and covering baseline, functional and multiple literacy⁴.

WELCOMING

The report of the EU High Level Group of experts on literacy⁵, which sets out the main evidence on the state of literacy performance in the EU and calls for action in order to improve literacy levels across the Union.

IN THE LIGHT OF

The Presidency conference “Literacy for All” held in Nicosia on 5-6 September 2012, at which the findings of the High Level Group report were first presented,

and the informal ministerial meeting held in Nicosia on 4-5 October 2012, at which literacy issues were discussed by EU Education Ministers.

NOTING THAT

1. Literacy is a crucial life competence which empowers the individual citizen to develop capacities of reflection, oral expression, critical thinking and empathy, boosting personal development, self-confidence, a sense of identity and full participation in a digital and knowledge economy and society.
2. Low literacy levels hold back economic growth and reduce its sustainability. The economic benefits to Member States of reaching the EU's target of reducing the low performance in reading of 15-year-olds to below 15% can be considerable.

⁴ Baseline literacy: Having the knowledge of letters, words and text structures that is needed to read and write at a level that enables self-confidence and motivation for further development.
Functional literacy: The ability to read and write at a level that enables someone to develop and function in society, at home, at school and at work.

Multiple literacy: The ability to use reading and writing skills in order to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate written information. It is a basis for digital participation and making informed choices pertaining to finances, health, etc.

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/literacy/what-eu/high-level-group/documents/literacy-final-report_en.pdf

3. Levels of literacy remain stagnant in most European countries and no less than 1.1 million 15-year-olds (i.e. one in five) have inadequate literacy levels⁶.
4. Literacy is the gateway to all further learning. Addressing low literacy levels is an effective way to combat the root causes of early school leaving, unemployment and limited participation in lifelong learning for the low-skilled.
5. Increasing digitisation requires ever higher standards of literacy, including the ability to assess texts critically, to deal with multiple forms of text, to decode images and to compare and integrate disparate pieces of information. In addition, social media networks have raised the importance and visibility of writing competences.
6. A considerable gap in learning outcomes exists in all European countries between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. In many EU countries pupils in the bottom quartile of social status lag more than two or even three years behind students coming from the top quartile, while in a few countries disadvantaged students tend to be considered as functional illiterates by the age of 15.
7. There is a significant and widening gap between boys' and girls' performance in reading as measured at age 15, equivalent to around one year between them, the underlying cause of which is motivational.
8. In the field of vocational education and training, there is insufficient support in some cases for improving basic skills and for understanding the importance of literacy in relation to work skills.

AGREES THAT

1. Literacy is not solely an educational issue, but also a personal, economic, cultural and social one. Accordingly, and in order to create broad ownership, a range of players in society - including businesses, media, NGOs, social partners, providers of non-formal learning, cultural institutions, as well as social, employment and health services at local level - need to be involved in any initiatives to improve literacy levels.
2. Creating a literate environment to promote reading and to improve literacy performance requires increased availability of diverse reading materials in schools, libraries and media centres, but also in unconventional locations, as well as at home, and requires more support for families from a very early age. Parental awareness needs to be raised of the issue and of the crucial role which parents can play in improving children's literacy skills and supporting motivation and engagement with reading, both in early childhood and throughout a child's schooling.

⁶ For the purpose of this text, inadequate literacy levels means reading skills at level 1 or below in PISA, which equate to the ability to use the most basic reading skills such as decoding words and writing simple phrases. Pupils at this level lack the ability to compare, contrast, categorise, integrate or evaluate information, to deal with long, complex, competing or unfamiliar texts, to make inferences, hypotheses or to approach a text critically.

3. It is urgent to increase the effectiveness of measures taken within Member States and at EU level with the aim of improving literacy among children and adults, in particular those with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. There is evidence to show that family literacy programmes are cost-efficient and highly effective.
4. Participation in high quality early childhood education and care which provides play-based language development and stimulation managed by qualified staff is essential for reducing socio-economic gaps and giving young children a solid foundation for later life.
5. Early childhood education and care staff and primary teachers should have the necessary competences to detect and address language and learning difficulties at an early stage.
6. The pedagogical competences of primary school teachers in the teaching of reading and writing, for instance in the pedagogical use of ICT, need to be strengthened, where appropriate. In addition, supporting teachers in secondary schools to teach literacy across all subjects and, where relevant, promoting access to expert advice for all teachers, will help to consolidate and achieve further progress.
7. The impact of new technologies on literacy has not been fully exploited by education systems. Reviewing learning materials and methods in the light of increasing digitisation, and supporting teachers in the use of new pedagogies can reinforce the motivation of learners.
8. Language and literacy assessment for newly arrived migrant children and adults in the language(s) of the country of residence should be encouraged, along with more individualised support for such groups. Support in the language of origin could also be provided, where considered appropriate, and as resources allow.
9. A more coherent literacy curriculum, including mainstreaming literacy across the school curriculum and developing an adult literacy curriculum, should be supported by distinct age-related standards and assessment tools, together with effective quality assurance.
10. Monitoring skills levels in the adult population and engaging businesses, media, NGOs, social partners, cultural institutions, as well as social, employment and health services at local level, should form the basis for strategies aimed at increasing awareness of literacy problems in society as a whole.
11. Diversifying and improving the quality of adult literacy provision requires tailored pedagogical training for adult literacy teachers; a curriculum closely linked to work-relevant skills and supported by appropriate materials; adequate length and intensity of courses; ICT support and assessment methods.

ACCORDINGLY INVITES MEMBER STATES TO

1. Ensure an effective evidence base through monitoring and data collection, making maximum use of existing resources, such as PISA and PIAAC surveys.

2. Develop approaches to improving literacy that combine specific contributions from all relevant actors and organisations and authorities, educational and non-educational, as part of broader skills strategies; and, where relevant, strengthen cooperation on literacy initiatives between local, regional and national authorities, social partners and teachers', parents' and adult learners' representatives.
3. Encourage the adoption of broadly based awareness-raising measures in order to keep the literacy issue in the public eye and to break the taboo of poor literacy skills at all ages. In particular, employers could be made more aware of the motivational and economic gains of improving the literacy skills of their employees, and encouraged to take appropriate action.
4. Promote the development and implementation of family literacy programmes, particularly in the case of socio-economically disadvantaged families, in order to support parents and other family members in improving both their own and their children's literacy skills.
5. Promote generalised equitable access to high quality early childhood education and care as an essential contribution towards reducing socio-economic gaps.
6. Keep learning materials and methods under review in the light of increasing digitisation, in order to support learner motivation, and make greater use of non-formal learning resources. Promote the development of software for schools, in order to help teachers devise new approaches to improving literacy.
7. Encourage the development of clear guidelines on the competences teachers need in order to teach reading and writing, both in schools and to adult learners, promoting individualised teaching approaches in response to specific needs.
8. Raise awareness and knowledge among teachers of the theoretical foundations of literacy learning and teaching, so as to enable them to detect and deal with their pupils' reading and writing difficulties; and promote the availability of expert advice and, where appropriate, the support of specialised teachers.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO

1. Report on their actions to improve literacy levels at all ages and, where possible, on the impact of those actions in the next Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET2020") in 2015.
2. Use all the relevant actions of the current Lifelong Learning Programme and the future EU programme in education and training, as well as the resources of the European Social Fund, to support and disseminate innovative approaches to improving literacy attainment across the EU, and to reinforce the evidence base for future policy making. Without prejudice to the outcome of the negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, support more strategic and cross-sectoral actions on literacy under the future EU education and training programme, in order to stimulate innovation and improve the effectiveness of policy measures.

3. Ensure, where appropriate, that literacy issues are adequately covered within the Europe 2020 process.

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO

1. Support European cooperation on literacy issues, notably by developing a European network of organisations working in this field in the Member States, with a view to promoting transnational cooperation and supporting the development of national literacy policies; and organise, together with interested Member States, a *Europe Loves Reading* week aimed at raising public awareness of literacy issues across the EU.
2. Present in 2013 a report on policy cooperation on basic skills, outlining effective policies for reducing the share of low achievers in literacy, mathematics and science across the entire lifelong learning spectrum, and emphasising both reading and writing skills and competences.
3. Ensure that Commission initiatives on ICT in education, as well as in the youth field, fully address the challenges and opportunities of digitisation and new technologies in relation to literacy.
4. Facilitate the identification, analysis and sharing of good practices on policy initiatives to improve literacy performance by all appropriate means, including the instruments available under the open method of coordination and the new literacy page on the Europa website.
5. Use the periodical Education and Training Monitor to provide comparative data and analysis on progress towards the "ET 2020" benchmark on basic skills and to reinforce the evidence base for policy making on literacy.
6. Use the new framework for cooperation with the OECD⁷ in the field of education to strengthen the availability of national monitoring and data collection."

⁷ The right of participation of all Members States in the work of this organisation should be ensured.