

Contribution to the *European Education Area*
by the Working Group on Culture and Education
of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union
(COMECE)

The following contribution of the COMECE Working Group on Culture and Education serves as input for reflection and action in the context of the [European Education Area \(EEA\)](#), following the European Commission's Communication on "Achieving the European Education Area by 2025". Drafted by COMECE Secretariat and experts from the EU Bishops' Conferences, it offers an overview of the main elements of the concept of "integral education", as promoted by Pope Francis in his **Global Compact on Education** and **Catholic Social Teaching**, together with specific recommendations on the six dimensions of the EEA in the context of the current educational challenges the EU is facing.

1. The anthropology of the human person

In the vision of the Catholic Church, the human person, as created in the image of God, is made from the unity of body and soul. The entirety of the person and their life in the image of God dignifies every woman and man in her or his life – the **dignity** of the person derives from the fact it has been created by God.¹ In particular, each person can reflect on the world and himself through consciousness and intellect – where consciousness allows to understand one's personhood subjectively, while intellect enables a certain degree of objective knowledge of the world. These two aspects – man's objective and subjective activities – are united in the person and mutually integrate each other.²

In the area of education, a further essential aspect of man's dignity and life is **freedom**, intended as the possibility to find what truly corresponds to one's most profound desires – what fulfils the person in his or her pursue of an ultimate understanding of reality in relation with destiny – and with the questions on the meaning of life.³ Since freedom finds its expression in the capacity to educate and teach, it follows that education is essentially a "**risk**", since it is based both on the freedom of the teacher and that of the learner. The teacher is, in fact, involving him or herself in the **relationship** with the learners, putting not only their competences or teachings, but their whole life in the equation of education in exchange with the students, who in turn have the freedom to follow

¹ Holy See, Catechism of the Catholic Church, retrieved from:
https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/p1s2c1p6_it.htm

² Tolo, P. P. (2018). Elements of the Integral Vision of Human Person in The Wednesday Catechesis of John Paul II. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 5(4) 1-12., retrieved from:
<https://scholarpublishing.org/index.php/ASSR/article/download/4363/2698>

³ Alberto, S., Prades, J., Giussani, L., *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, 191 (Italian version)

the teachings and the human experience that the teacher represents. Therefore, if education and freedom are so tightly connected, freedom is essential to reach a certain degree of dignity in the educational development of the learner and, thus, in the possibility of valorising one's culture and communicating it to others through education.

These aspects undeniably highlight the complexity of the human person and the impossibility to look at each woman and man without considering, among others, his and her intellect, spirituality, conscience and freedom.

2. Integral education for the human person

Education stems from the verb *e-ducere*, i.e. to educate, to bring out, to bring to light, preparing the learner to discern.⁴ Education is what accompanies each human being to his or her full development and growth, addressing all dimensions of the learner and facilitating the capacity to "shape his or her own future".⁵ As addressed by Pope Francis in his message on the Global Compact on Education, the **human person** should always be put **at the centre of the educational process**: "make human persons in their value and dignity the centre of every educational programme, both formal and informal, in order to foster their distinctiveness, beauty and uniqueness, and their capacity for relationship with others and with the world around them".⁶

Education aims to form **well-rounded persons** in all their constitutive social, psychological and intellectual dimensions, convictions and beliefs, who are capable of living in communities and societies and working harmoniously for their cohesion and wellbeing – education is the foundation of the person's actions and intentions to work for the **Common Good**. In light of this, education cannot be reduced to one or few dimensions of the human person. For instance, a merely functional view of education – one that aims to achieve employability and competitiveness in the labour market – strongly reduces the amplitude and complexity of the **dimensions of the person** and the multiplicity of his or her skills and aspirations.⁷

Education must always be integral and capable to ensure "a balanced focus on cognitive, affective, social, professional, ethical and spiritual aspects", encouraging each person to develop their talents and abilities.⁸ Through education, each person should be granted the possibility to achieve personal maturity and a comprehensive understanding of reality, enabling him or her to **critically think about and interpret relational, social, philosophical and spiritual issues**. If the human person is at the centre of the educational project, with sound long-term policies that can orient institutions,

⁴ Pope Francis, *Global Compact on Education*, retrieved from: <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/vademecum-english.pdf>

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 187

⁶ Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: "Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond", 15 October 2020, retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html

⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educating today and tomorrow, A Renewing Passion* (Instrumentum Laboris), 2014, 12

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6

enterprises, teachers, trainers, families and learners to personal engagement, social cohesion and work for the Common Good, it can truly contribute to the benefits and needs of European societies.⁹

A further element to be considered is that of **responsibility**: since education is not limited to the school environment, rather is embedded in our communities and societies, each person is responsible for the education of younger generations. In the Global Compact for Education, Pope Francis elaborates on seven commitments for all educators, which include, among others, preserving the dignity of human persons, listening to the voices of young people and including full participation of young girls and women in education, as well as seeing the family as the centre of education and looking for new ways to understand the world in the context of integral ecology.¹⁰

It therefore becomes essential to make use of the **concept of 'integral education'** in order to avoid reducing the complexity of the term and to include all features of the human person in the educational process.

3. The situation of Education in the EU

In order to address education in its integral dimension and contribute to find solutions to today's challenges in such an essential, yet oftentimes overlooked policy area, an evaluation of the current stand of education in the EU is necessary.

The importance of education is undoubted and intrinsically connected to other factors, such as **poverty**. For instance, in 2019 the [at-risk-of-poverty rate in the EU](#) was more than double for adults (25 to 59 years old) whose parents had a low level of education (20.3%) than it was for people whose parents had a high level of education (8.6%).¹¹ The Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent socio-economic crisis are undoubtedly one of the most impactful events that have struck the education sector in the past years. However, EU Member States' performance did not excel before the pandemic. Although improvements in the participation rates in early childhood education and

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 167: "Education and upbringing, concern for others, a well-integrated view of life and spiritual growth: all these are essential for quality human relationships and for enabling society itself to react against injustices, aberrations and abuses of economic, technological, political and media power".

¹⁰ Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation for Catholic Education: "Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond", 15 October 2020: For these reasons, we commit ourselves personally and in common: *First*, to make human persons in their value and dignity the centre of every educational programme, both formal and informal, in order to foster their distinctiveness, beauty and uniqueness, and their capacity for relationship with others and with the world around them, while at the same time teaching them to reject lifestyles that encourage the spread of the throwaway culture. *Second*, to listen to the voices of children and young people to whom we pass on values and knowledge, in order to build together a future of justice, peace and a dignified life for every person. *Third*, to encourage the full participation of girls and young women in education. *Fourth*, to see in the family the first and essential place of education. *Fifth*, to educate and be educated on the need for acceptance and in particular openness to the most vulnerable and marginalized. *Sixth*, to be committed to finding new ways of understanding the economy, politics, growth and progress that can truly stand at the service of the human person and the entire human family, within the context of an integral ecology. *Seventh*, to safeguard and cultivate our common home, protecting it from the exploitation of its resources, and to adopt a more sober lifestyle marked by the use of renewable energy sources and respect for the natural and human environment, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, solidarity and a circular economy"

¹¹ Numbers according to Eurostat available on <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211207-1>

lifelong learning are worth mentioning – at EU level, from 90.3 % in 2009 to 95.3 % in 2019 for the former and from 7.8 % in 2010 to 9.2 % in 2020 the latter¹² – many of the targets put forward in the ET 2020 ([Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training](#)) were not met. The Union, for instance, did not manage to reduce the share of 15-year-olds with low levels of reading, maths and science to less than 15% by 2020. The most recent PISA studies (2018) highlight that one in five pupils on average in the EU cannot successfully complete basic tasks in reading, science and mathematics.¹³ Such results pose uncertainties on the economic future of the EU and, most importantly, on the ability of learners to meaningfully participate in social life once they become adults. Correlation between the socio-economic status of learners and underachievement has been deemed one of the main drivers of failure in the formation of children and having long-term consequences which extend until higher education.¹⁴ Failure in supporting learners from childhood education and care to tertiary education and training has repercussions for all.

If the situation before the outbreak of the **Covid-19 pandemic** showed considerable room for improvement, the health crisis – with its socio-economic externalities in Europe and the world – has worsened the state of affairs. Although other countries in the world experienced more devastating consequences of the pandemic than those seen in Europe, EU Member States struggled through the first months of the health crisis and are now recovering from the lockdowns. Total school closures during the first waves of the pandemic were the cause of instability for learners and their families, leading to **loss of learning time, delays in learning curricula** and **struggles to adapt to online learning**, among others.

The effects of the health crisis on the progress of learners will undoubtedly have long-lasting consequences. The first issues are already visible in studies being carried out at national level. The consequences of distance learning are proven to be manifold: from less motivation and time dedicated to learning, to stress symptoms and changes in learners' behaviours in social interactions.¹⁵ Learners' and their families' socio-economic status – which worsened considerably during the pandemic – had serious consequences on the learning attitude and progress of disadvantaged children and students. Access to digital resources and devices in low-income households was restricted during distance learning, causing up to 32% of pupils to lack access to education during the pandemic, making it impossible for parents to accompany their children in their educational endeavours.¹⁶

¹² European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, retrieved from https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/eea-communication-sept2020_en.pdf, 3

¹³ European Commission, PISA 2018 and the EU, Striving for social fairness through education, retrieved from: https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/pisa-2018-eu_1.pdf, 14

¹⁴ Ibid., 24-25

¹⁵ JRC, The likely impact of COVID-19 on education: Reflections based on the existing literature and recent international datasets, 2020

¹⁶ European Parliament, *The future of European education in the context of COVID-19*, European Parliament resolution of 22 October 2020 on the future of European education in the context of COVID-19 (2020/2760(RSP)), retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0282_EN.pdf

The repercussions of the pandemic vary on **different levels of education**: for instance, higher education is forecasted to experience challenges such as cuts from the public sector, tuition fee losses, potential closure of certain institutions and worse outcomes for most vulnerable students.¹⁷ At EU level, early childhood education and care (ECOC) faced more issues in terms of financial aspects, staffing and increased workload and stress, with substantial effects on families and children – difficulties in reconciling professional and private life, lack of family support with childcare due to the vulnerability of elderly people to the virus, limited access to support for children with special needs.

The pandemic drew attention to the **fragility of the education sector** and to the **need to make it more resilient**, undoubtedly pointing out its overlaps with other areas of policymaking, from youth to family, from the world of work to health. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the role and value of Education, especially in the context of the new challenges arisen from the pandemic, and to table long-term processes and solutions that may integrally and comprehensively address the area. The European Commission's latest [Communication on the European Education Area by 2025](#), with its **six dimensions - quality education, inclusion and gender equality, the green and digital transitions, teachers and trainers, higher education and the geopolitical dimension** – represents a framework to strengthen, empower and improve EU Member States' education systems, in respect of the principles of subsidiarity and Art. 165 and 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

To this aim, **all aspects of education** should be addressed: theoretical and practice-oriented knowledge, skills and competences can contribute to the formation of persons, leading them to understand the importance of each issue and, therefore, be aware of the interconnectedness of each and every personal action in our societies. Inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to learning and training should be favoured so as to authentically match the “multifaceted richness of reality”.¹⁸ Mirroring the vast universe of education and training institutions and actors, education should also be understood as non-formal and informal education, two forms that complement and complete formal education in the learners' growth and path to maturity. The following sections will address the six dimensions of the European Education Area, aiming to make recommendations to EU policymakers for the improvement of education in the EU.

4. The six dimensions of the European Education Area

4.1 Quality education

According to the SDGs (sustainable development goals), by 2030 all children in the world should be able to receive an inclusive and equitable quality education. Although the EU is committed to ensure quality education in all its Member States, it is worrisome that the EU underachievement average

¹⁷ Farnell, T., Skledar Matijević, A., Šćukanec Schmidt, N. (2021). *'The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence'*, NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 59

¹⁸ Pope Francis, (2020), Apostolic Constitution “Veritatis Gaudium” on ecclesiastical universities and faculties, 29 c.

rate stood at around 22 % for maths, reading and science in 2018.¹⁹ Although Education should not be reduced to mere knowledge and competences, basic skills in subjects are needed, especially in first stages of education, to allow children to understand reality and have the necessary knowledge to proceed in their formative and, later on, working path.

In an integral approach to education, **quality education** goes beyond the mere learning of notions, since it involves the complexity of the human person, in its interpersonal, social, intercultural and behavioural attitudes. It is important that quality education reflects all dimensions of the human person, in his/her quest for meaning and for meaningful vocation in life and in the context of families and communities. Integral quality education is also one that ensures that the next generations of adults grow up in the **respect of the diversity of other religions, cultural identities and traditions**. To this aim, **multilingualism and confessional education** can contribute to foster a true European way of life with shared values and respect within European societies.

Multilingualism and teaching of foreign languages, for instance, prove to be beneficial for strengthening social cohesion and intercultural dialogue, as stressed in the 2019 EU Council conclusions: “Multilingual competence is one of the key competences that could foster employability, personal fulfilment, active citizenship, intercultural understanding and social inclusion; it is defined as ‘the ability to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication’”.²⁰ Language is fundamental to understand other cultures – even minority cultures often present within national boundaries – and allows more intercultural exchange and cooperation between peoples and persons, the study of languages from an early age should be high on the agenda of the European Education Area.

Coupled with multilingualism, **knowledge of cultures and cultural heritage in the EU** proves essential in raising awareness in learners of the rich, diverse and distinguished European cultural heritage, which is part of their life and identity. Learning about history, literature, music and arts should be given a boost from EU Member States, when implementing reforms in their education systems, ensuring that both the national cultural specificities and the other EU Member States’ cultures are learnt and shared, tapping in the potential that creative and cultural programmes at EU level can have for dissemination and awareness raising in education.

Despite it being a solely national competence and at times a remit of individual education providers, **confessional education** is what supports the learner to achieve an understanding of the world that goes beyond the material dimension and addresses questions about purpose, faith, meaning and morality. As provided by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 14.3), parents have the right to ensure that the education and teaching of their children conforms to their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions.²¹ The variety of modalities and agreements for the teaching of

¹⁹ OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2018 results, retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm>

²⁰ Council of the European Union, Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages (2019/C 189/03), retrieved from: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(02\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02)&from=EN)

²¹ European Union Agency for fundamental rights, retrieved from: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/14-right-education>

confessional education²² reflect the diversity of Europe and should be given high consideration by Member States when education reforms are implemented. Moreover, since confessional education is recognised as a powerful contributor “to strengthen human rights, democratic citizenship and participation, and to the development of competences for intercultural dialogue”²³, teaching about religion(s) can be a tool for more cohesive, integrated and respectful societies stimulating learners to be aware of one’s own and others’ fundamental questions and preventing hate behaviours.

Quality education, however, does not stop at primary levels, it must be addressed during the whole process of formation of the person through higher education and in light of lifelong learning. To this end, **quality assurance bodies**, such as the Member States’ Agencies for quality assurance, are valuable actors to keep Member States’s higher education institutions on track and engage with governments on both the implementation of national reforms of education and their consequences on single universities. Quality higher education implies learning and exchanging also with other networks of private higher education institutions to improve the features of quality education and enhance cooperation for the benefit of students. The [European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education \(ENQA\)](#) is the association that follows the mission of higher Education, i.e. to contribute to responsible and democratic citizens, trying to develop and inspire the whole of the human being through its work of quality assurance.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen** the development of learners’ **basic skills**, ensuring that they are complemented by an integral approach that includes interpersonal, intercultural, citizenship-related and interreligious competences.
- **Foster more cooperation** at EU level on the teaching of languages and the spread of multilingualism, with projects able to tap into the full potential of digital education to develop learners’ linguistic and cultural knowledge.
- Within the remit of Member States and in the respect of the principle of subsidiarity, ensure that **confessional education and education on religions** are further developed and reinforced, for the sake of respectful and purposeful future generations of adults.
- Ensure that **quality assurance** is upheld in all phases of the learning process, in light of lifelong learning and for the benefit of all learners and workers, especially in view of the green and digital transitions.

4.2 Inclusive education

From the right to receive education in conformity with their parents’ beliefs and convictions, follows that each learner must be supported to ensure that his or her education can continue beyond the first

²² Llorent-Vaquero, M. “Religious Education in Public Schools in Western Europe”, *International Education Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1165245.pdf>

²³ Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education, retrieved from: http://www.europeanrights.eu/public/atti/dimensione_religiosa_ing.HTM

years of formation. The share of **early leavers**²⁴ in the EU amounted to 9.9% of 18–24-year-olds in the EU in 2021, ranging from 2.4% in Croatia to 15.3% in Romania. Statistics indicate that the share is usually higher for young men (11.4%) and lower for young women (7.9%).²⁵ Although the target set by the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training was barely met, the Covid-19 pandemic will substantially contribute to worsen the situation by increasing the risk of dropout. The **higher level of poverty of EU families**²⁶ and the impossibility for them to attend online classes during the hardest months of the pandemic made them consequently fall behind and with the need to catch up with their peers. In light of the special attention that must be paid to each learner, accompanying him or her in their formative experience and educational endeavours, **more peer-learning and sharing of best practices** in the EU would serve the aim to achieve better conditions for **disadvantaged learners from poorer socio-economic backgrounds** and reach better systems for hybrid and digital learning accessible to all.

Disadvantaged socio-economic background, however, does not represent the only feature of underachievement and early dropout. Life in rural areas and migrant background, as reminded by the Communication, are two further factors of inequality in education and root causes of social exclusion. The **urban-rural divide** shows itself also in education and training, with an increasing gap between those with tertiary education in cities and rural areas. Moreover, education institutions, both in lower and higher grades, are frequently absent from rural areas, e.g. early childcare or higher school grades, thus severely impacting the regions' liveability, the access to education and the potential for innovation capacity in such areas.²⁷

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a powerful means to tackle social exclusion through education. The possibility of attending courses in specific subjects and putting one's skills at use in a practical domain allows learners of all ages to continue their study path, while mastering the right skills for their future, both in terms of life and work. The initiative of the [Centres of Vocational Excellence](#) should foster a collection of good practices and incentivise EU Member States to boost projects of cooperation between training institutes and the private sector. The **success of VET providers in favouring the integration of young and elderly**, as well as migrants and learners with disabilities in society, is a sign that more efforts ought to be put in this sector. The Italian VET provider "[Cometa formazione](#)" is a best practice example whose mission is to welcome children and young people to promote their development and harmonious growth, favouring the expression of all their talents and tackling early school leaving. Born in 2000 from the experience of two foster families, the organisation now offers hospitality, education and vocational training to 1300 children and is also part of the Centre of Vocational Excellence "[GIVE](#)".

Recommendations

²⁴ Defined as 18–24-year-olds in the EU who had completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training. See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training

²⁵ Eurostat, "Early leavers from education and training", https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_leavers_from_education_and_training#Analysis_by_sex

²⁶ COMECE, Statement of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission "Listen to the cry of the poor in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its recovery", 2021, retrieved from: <https://www.comece.eu/comece-releases-recommendations-to-enhance-the-fight-against-poverty-in-the-eu/>

²⁷ COMECE Contribution to the European Commission open consultation on the future of rural areas

→ **Fight education poverty** by setting up more ambitious targets for 2030 and ensuring that the funds from the NRRPs are directed to national education and training systems to make them more inclusive, sustainable and resilient, with at least 10% of the NRRPs dedicated to improve national education systems' resilience and quality.

→ Ensure that policies for the education sector are not limited to education institutions or providers, rather **consider the learning environments and the actors actively involved in education besides teachers and trainers**, i.e. families and stakeholders from non-formal education providers.

→ At national level, ensure that **cooperation with VET providers**, especially for **social inclusion of disadvantaged persons, unemployed, migrants and people with disabilities**, is fostered through partnerships with both public and private sector; at EU level, facilitate exchange programmes for VET learners, not only through [ALMA](#), but also through strengthening existing inclusivity of Erasmus+, simplifying application procedures and making such programmes as participated as possible, especially for most disadvantaged students.

4.3 Green and digital transition

4.3.1 The digital transition

In its connection with the world of employment, education should be interpreted as a tool to bridge between learning and practice, between acquiring knowledge and competences and putting them to good use in the world of work. In the context of the **green and digital transitions**, education and training should focus on the objectives of social and ecological sustainability, in order to favour processes leading to integral ecology and authentic ecological citizenship.²⁸ In this respect, VET can be considered a strong tool to address the challenges of the twin digital and green transition and lead to inclusive education systems where learners can find their path of fulfilment and, subsequently, opportunities in the labour market.

In view of **reinforcing processes of lifelong learning, reskilling and upskilling**, the recent proposals on micro-credentials can be beneficial for the integration of all people in the labour market. They are also a potential tool to reinforce the concept of integral education for young people and adults, bringing about lifelong learning for the transformations witnessed in today's Europe. It is necessary, however, to address the purpose of Education as a whole before tackling the question of micro-credentials and how they ought to be created, used and recognised.²⁹

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the huge challenges faced by learners when dealing with **digital learning and distance teaching**. Lack of or poor access to digital devices and connectivity, lack of teachers' digital skills and absence of social experiences have damaged the fabric of education for children and their families as a whole. In some cases, **inequalities** have been deepened by remote learning, making families more financially unstable when purchasing digital devices for their

²⁸ Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato Si'*, II. Educating for the covenant between humanity and the environment, 209-215 and COMECE Contribution to the European Commission's Consultation on a proposal for a recommendation on Education for environmental sustainability

²⁹ European Commission, "A European approach to micro-credentials", <https://education.ec.europa.eu/levels/higher-education/european-approach-to-micro-credentials>

children and more under pressure to undertake the role of teachers in accompanying their children through online classes.³⁰

In addition to filling the digital divide, education should also **provide learners the means to use digital tools properly**. Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation and the benefit of all should be incentivised by Member States in their actions and education reforms. Especially in the first years of education, children should be educated on the risks and threats in the digital environment. Moreover, they should also learn to differentiate between authentic and reliable sources of information and fake news, tackling the issue of **digital illiteracy** in the EU for both young people and older generations. For instance, in 2019 20% of Europeans aged 16 to 24 were not in possess of basic digital skills.³¹ The [Digital Education Action Plan \(2021-2027\)](#), in its second priority area (“Enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation”) and its Action 7³² is a powerful tool to ensure that young people have the right digital skills to thrive and learn. Programmes to educate learners on the use of digital tools should consider that “the kind of education we need today not only does not fear the complexity of reality, but strives to enable all those to whom it is addressed to dwell in this complexity and “humanize” it, in the awareness that any instrument always depends on the intentions of those who use it.”³³

4.3.2 The green transition and the need for integral ecology in education

When looking into how education and training can support the move towards a more sustainable and resource-conserving society and economy, the term ‘**integral ecology**’ elucidates some aspects that education needs to consider when addressing sustainability. Especially expressed by Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, it offers a perspective on ecology and sustainability also for the area of education and training.

The concept of integral ecology, in fact, could foster a common understanding of the basic principles needed to reach a “**shared language on sustainability**” and comprehensively address issues of sustainability including all areas (e.g. lifestyle, social practices, work, study, leisure, etc.). In particular, an ‘integral ecology’ approach would support the European Green Deal by allowing to consider all consequences of EU policies in these fields. Education for environmental sustainability should be shaped through a “whole-of-society” approach, including all forms of education - e.g., formal, non-formal and informal education, as well as vocational training – and all actors involved in education – formal ones as well as informal ones, in particular families, communities and associations – through a lifelong learning approach. The **promotion of ecology and sustainability**

³⁰ Mascheroni, G., Saeed, M., Valenza, M., Cino, D., Dreesen, T., Zaffaroni, L. G. and Kardefelt-Winther, D., *Learning at a Distance, Children’s remote learning experiences in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1182-learning-at-a-distance-childrens-remote-learning-experiences-in-italy-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.html>

³¹ Eurostat, retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20200715-1>

³² European Commission , Digital Education Action Plan (Action 7), <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/digital-education-action-plan/action-7>

³³ Global Compact on Education, *Instrumentum laboris*, retrieved from: <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/instrumentum-laboris-en.pdf>

is also one of the objectives of non-formal groups linked to Churches and religious communities in Europe (e.g. catechesis groups, scouts).

Education for environmental sustainability should foster knowledge and competences for authentic **ecological citizenship**. To reach such objective, the task for educators is to communicate, besides the comprehensive understanding of the environment, the need for a responsible use of natural resources, the care of nature, the capacity to care for and live together with others and in communion with all, fostering practices of solidarity and sharing. With a view to integral ecology in education, values such as **care, sobriety and humility** should be central. They could support the turn from a mere consumerist view of society towards a **Common-Good oriented, socially sustainable and environmentally friendly approach to nature and people**. To this aim, within the remits of the Member States, a stronger focus on supporting parents and teachers as primary educators of sustainability would be beneficial and necessary.

Recommendations

→ **Address the digital divide**, implementing all aspects of the Digital Education Action Plan and enhancing reskilling and upskilling, aiming to provide learners with internet access and the necessary digital devices, while protecting children against harmful digital content.

→ **Promote innovation in teaching practices**, learning from the developments caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to create balanced programmes of digital and in-presence education which allow learners to progress in their digital skills and social competences.

→ Ensure that the concept of **'integral ecology'** is included in education programmes in light of lifelong learning, involving all stakeholders, i.e. families, communities and non-formal education providers.

→ **Strengthen partnerships between education institutions and faith-based organisations** active in the promotion of the care for the environment, through collaboration in the domains of formal, non-formal and informal education.

4.4 Teachers and trainers

Educators and trainers are among the main characters of the education environment, since their profession truly is a **mission to accompany young people in their path to adulthood and fulfilment**. The other actors of the educational milieu – staff, headmasters, pedagogical counsellors, etc. – contribute to shape a school environment where learners grow and mature in all dimensions of their life. Their work and personal endeavours can be considered examples for young people, who can see in them role models to follow and from whom they can learn beyond the knowledge and competences listed in school curricula. Formation of teachers and trainers is therefore of equal importance to learners' formation.

The education profession is, however, not as valued as it could be, especially considering the challenges it has to face: changes in school population, positive and negative externalities of the digital transition in school and university environments, as well as the latest mental health issues caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that teachers and trainers are supported in the EU Member States, especially through reforms that address teachers' learning needs (i.e. in digital education) and career development, in a perspective of continuous learning.

The [Erasmus+ Teachers Academies](#) can be a first step not only in making the teaching profession more attractive, but also to enhance the exchange of best practices among teachers and trainers, in particular on how to accompany students in the post-pandemic time and to make best use of digital technologies in the school environment, implementing sound strategies of learning mobility for a great number of teachers at EU level.

Great unbalances, both at EU level and within national constituencies, prove to be problematic in ensuring quality formation of learners. Issues linked to the **demographic crisis**, such as ageing teacher population, as well as challenges in the socio-economic conditions of certain regions, worsen teacher retention and quality education. **Shortages and oversupply of teacher workforce** – in some cases coexisting in certain Member States – are highly linked with the lack of incentives for teachers and trainers to work in areas characterised by high cost of living or remoteness.³⁴ For this reason, it is essential that Member States enter into dialogue with their own teaching professionals in order to find common solutions for the sake of all learners. Dialogue at EU level should also be fostered to exchange on best practices for teachers' retention and support. **Cooperation between the public and private spheres** is also essential to ensure quality teaching: the German Bishops' Conference, for instance, offers a specially tailored leadership seminar in cooperation with the Institute for Teacher Training Essen-Werden (ifl). The longstanding cooperation between the two institutions ensures that future teachers are prepared to work in Catholic educational institutes: they receive training on school law, management, communication and on the special Catholic-oriented mission of the school.

Recommendations

- At EU level, **promote paths of mobility for all teachers**, enabling a more structured exchange of best practices and strategies to support learners at all levels of education, especially in the areas of mental health and social skills.
- Within each Member State, **ensure that teachers are fully supported** in their profession and mission to accompany and educate learners; in particular, promoting their continuous education in the areas of digital education and intercultural dialogue.
- Promote **meaningful and practice-based dialogue** between and within Member States on issues concerning teachers' retention and ageing, allowing for reforms that improve their profession and incentivise their careers.

4.5 Higher education

European universities, both private and public, in their mission of research, education and innovation, are centres where the vocation of students and professionals becomes more consolidated, where students understand their future role in society. In his Exhortation *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis argued that “education makes us raise questions, keeps us from being anaesthetized by banality, and impels us to pursue meaning in life”.³⁵ Contrary to the recent tendencies to turn

³⁴ COMECE Contribution to the European Commission open consultation on the future of rural areas, 29-30

³⁵ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* of the Holy Father Francis to young people and to the entire People of God, 25 March 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html

universities into profit-focused activities or competition in reaching ever higher standards and financial subsidies and where students are treated as consumers, universities should turn to the true meaning of “**universitas**” - the group of students and teachers whose endeavours towards knowledge are shared and convergent to the same aims.

It is, therefore, in **human relationships** that universities must be grounded in order to make progress and research possible for the betterment of all areas of society. “The university is a privileged place where this culture of dialogue is promoted, taught and lived, this culture which does not indiscriminately level out differences and plurality – this is one of the risks of globalization – nor does it take them to the extreme, causing them to become causes of conflict. Rather, it opens to constructive dialogue.”³⁶

The **relationship student-teacher** is valuable for the next steps the learner will undertake in their life. As recalled by Pope Francis, education should aim to listen to the voices of children and young people in order to build together a future of justice, peace and a dignified life for every person”.³⁷ Academic staff and teachers should focus on **listening to the needs of young people** and their wishes for more just societies and a better future for all. As adults in the university environment, although with different degrees of knowledge in the area of studies, both student and teacher should engage in meaningful discussions on the purpose of their studies and research, especially in the context of their **social utility**. Higher education institutions, in fact, have a social role and can contribute to improve the life of communities and regions around them by engaging with all citizens and developing strategies in synergy with civil society, religious communities, municipalities and regional authorities. **Educating youth to work for the Common Good** and to serve all, especially the most disadvantaged, is the first step to ensure that future citizens are working in solidarity when confronted with crises and challenges.

Stemming from the previous thoughts on integral education, higher education should allow all students to find their own **vocation in the diversity of their interests**. While a certain focus should be set on technology, innovation and science, for they greatly contribute to social advancements and economic development, an equally important accent should be set on **humanities, arts and social sciences**. It is through an **integral approach to innovation and research** that European universities can thrive as places where the human side of knowledge can emerge. As a bearer of a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, literature, theology, philosophy, arts and music, among others, the EU cannot forget its cultural roots. The work of universities on humanities and social sciences, therefore, becomes of utmost importance to preserve and rediscover the beauty and value of European heritage, while implementing its teachings and knowledge in the political and social sphere to find creative and human solutions for current challenges.

³⁶ Meeting with the academic and cultural world, Address of Holy Father Francis, September 2013, retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130922_cultura-cagliari.html

³⁷ Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the occasion of the meeting organised by the Congregation For Catholic Education: "Global Compact on Education. Together to look beyond", 15 October 2020, retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html

Universities and vocational education and training are also two crucial domains for **mitigating brain drain**.³⁸ With the demographic crisis experienced by Member States and the disparity among regions in retaining students and young professionals, partnerships between higher education institutions and local authorities, as well as private stakeholders, are tools to achieve prosperity and social advancements in Member States suffering from brain drain.

Recommendations

- **Expand the focus of universities beyond STEM** by including humanities and social sciences in support of more human-centred practices of reflection, dialogue, study and research. Always aim towards teaching learners to critically think about the subjects learnt.
- Ensure that universities and higher education institutions are supported in their activities to reflect on the reasons underlying their research and the aim of working for the Common Good, especially in their role as **actors for social innovation and development** at local and regional level.
- Ensure that EU Member States, in coordination with the EU institutions, actively promote exchanges on best teaching practices in the higher education sector, allowing for **more mobility of students through Erasmus+ and the mutual recognition of diplomas**, accompanied by simplification of application and administrative procedures.
- Make use of the tools available (public-private partnerships, vocational education and training, the European Skills Agenda) to **tackle the issue of brain drain** and ensure students and young professionals' retention in Member States affected by brain drain.
- By implementing the recent [European strategy for universities](#) and its four objectives, enhance the role of **universities** and higher education institutions **as pivotal actors of interreligious and intercultural dialogue within the EU** and in the world; strengthen the societal role of university and support them in partnering with local actors for serving the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

4.6 Geopolitical dimension

While early childhood education and care - such as primary and secondary education - prove harder to be included in the framework of international educational exchanges and cooperation, higher education can be considered as a true ambassador for culture and the European way of life between the EU and third countries. In addition to **exporting positive European values** through exchanges between universities and higher education institutions around the globe, the European Union can **favour a culture of dialogue** through exchanges between European higher education institutions and partners worldwide.

As stated by Pope Francis, "a country flourishes when constructive dialogue occurs between its many rich cultural components: popular culture, university culture, youth culture, artistic culture, technological culture, economic culture, family culture and media culture".³⁹ In the same way that

³⁸ Committee of the Regions, Opinion factsheet on 'Brain Drain in the EU: addressing the challenge at all levels', retrieved from: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/our-work/Pages/OpinionTimeline.aspx?opId=CDR-4645-2019>

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

university culture can contribute to constructive dialogue, relations between European and non-European universities are to be considered as a **powerful tool to support cooperation, peace and fraternity among peoples**. As recalled by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, “the university is a privileged place where this culture of dialogue is promoted, taught and lived, this culture which does not indiscriminately level out differences and plurality – this is one of the risks of globalization – nor does it take them to the extreme, causing them to become causes of conflict. Rather, it opens to constructive dialogue.”⁴⁰

In view of fostering a culture of dialogue through universities, such processes of cooperation should always be based on **values**, turning the focus away from mere competitiveness and ensuring that young learners and researchers can exchange on their experiences and **make their contribution to better societies, economies and democracies**. In particular, a specific focus should be set on the value of **interreligious and intercultural exchange among universities**, which can become centres of dialogue between religions, cultures and traditions – for instance, such focus could be implemented in the [Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degrees](#) programmes. To make this possible, mobility of students, researchers and teachers needs to be enhanced, especially in EU neighbouring countries, where people-to-people contacts and more cooperation at political level can be improved by exchange programmes in education, culture and cultural heritage. The target group in such cases should especially be the most disadvantaged students, who often lack access to exchange programmes at international level. Vocational education and training can be an efficient tool not only to make international cooperation between universities more accessible and more targeted to innovation, in synergy with the most traditional actors (i.e. universities) in the non-EU academic environment, but also in projects promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills between the EU and non-EU countries, such as the [SAAM](#) project (Supporting Alliance for African Mobility).⁴¹

Recommendations

- **Reinforce cooperation between EU and third countries’ higher education institutions**, for meaningful dialogue, improving students’, researchers’ and teachers’ mobility.
- **Promote values such as solidarity and fraternity** through partnerships between European and third countries’ education institutions, focusing especially on interreligious and intercultural exchange.
- **Multiply possibilities for most disadvantaged students** from the EU and abroad to participate in exchange programmes between EU and third countries’ universities, especially in the EU neighbourhood, for the sake of more inclusive partnerships (e.g. by tapping in the potential of VET).
- **Enhance cooperation between Education institutions** through existing programmes and reduce the focus on competitiveness, redirecting such efforts to strengthen dialogue between academic

⁴⁰ Global Compact on Education, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.educationglobalcompact.org/resources/Risorse/vademecum-english.pdf>

⁴¹ The [SAAM project](#) (Supporting Alliance for African Mobility) is a pilot project in the field of VET (Vocational Educational and Training) which aims to promote the establishment of mechanisms for the exchange of knowledge, training methodologies and skills between Europe and Africa. The project is promoted by the [San Viator Sopuserta](#) centre of vocational education and training and carried out by many faith-oriented [vocational training centres from Europe and Africa](#).

institutions worldwide. Ensure that work on internationalisation is always balanced with the cultural context of EU Member States.

5. General conclusions

The European Education Area, with its six dimensions and ambitious goals, offers a framework for action for EU Member States, educational actors and institutions to respond to the current challenges in the world of work, digitalisation and in the everchanging geopolitical environment. The **impact of the health crisis** and the constant instability that the EU faces has endangered all educational systems and, most importantly, risks to have long-lasting consequences on the future of young and older learners.

This contribution has set its foundations in **recalling the human dignity of each person**, which always has to be the foundation of each policymaking effort: as suggested by Pope Francis, putting human dignity of learners at the centre of the educational project means to “**foster their distinctiveness, beauty and uniqueness**, and their capacity for relationship with others and with the world around them, while at the same time teaching them to reject lifestyles that encourage the spread of the throwaway culture”.⁴²

Understanding education as “integral” implies paying attention to all dimensions of learners, their thirst for knowledge and for relationships with others, their questions about meaning and their interest to respectfully engage with other cultures, traditions and religions, guided by teachers, instructors and families, in an **effort made in synergy by the whole community**.

By listing recommendations to improve and accompany the construction of the European Education Area, the contribution of the COMECE Working Group on Education and Culture has highlighted the **need for more cooperation between the public and private sectors** and the necessity to enter in **dialogue with all stakeholders involved in formal, informal and non-formal education, such as Churches and faith communities**, for the sake of a holistic approach to education, training and formation. Only by including entire communities in the educational process will learners be respected in their dignity and find their vocation in life, introducing **creative and transformative processes for the Common Good and the future of humanity**.

⁴² See note 6