

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism

Lifelong learning, adult education, and achieving the Lisbon goals

German Adult Education Conference

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Check against delivery

Mister President of the federal Republic,

Madam President,

Madam Bundesministerin,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be with you and to have the opportunity to contribute to the 12th German Adult Education Conference.

The challenges

Today's Europe is confronted with major challenges. We have the effects of globalisation, with the emergence of newly industrialised and highly competitive countries. We have our demographic trends, with an ageing population and an increasing need of immigrant labour. Finally, the nature of our labour markets is changing, partly because of fast technological developments.

This last challenge points to the emergence of a knowledge-based economy and society, which makes training and education more important than ever before. Europeans need not only to update their skills, but also to acquire new ones. They need to do that to live and prosper in our modern society, as well as for personal fulfilment.

Where do we stand now in this respect? The picture is not reassuring; let me give you some figures. At present, as many as 75 million Europeans—around 30% of the workforce—are low-skilled. In contrast, estimates show that by 2010 only 15 % of jobs will be for those with no more than basic schooling.

If Europe is to guarantee the sustainability of its social model, we must put greater efforts into improving education and training systems. If we are serious about making lifelong learning a reality, we must invest more in our human resources.

The political will seems to be there: the lifelong learning programme, the benchmarks and the strategies adopted at the European level in 2006 show that a culture of lifelong learning is taking shape. The national leaders of the Union, in their latest European Council, confirmed that “education and training are critical factors to develop the EU’s long-term potential for competitiveness as well as for social cohesion”.

They also added that “Investments in education and training produce high returns which substantially outweigh the costs”.

These are important statements, and I hope that these words will turn into facts, because—as you know well—education and training policies are largely national matters.

I would like to stress the recognition that investing in education is a smart investment decision. It brings two kinds of returns:

- First, economic returns, because a well educated and trained workforce boosts Europe’s potential for excellence, innovation and competitiveness.
- Second, it brings social returns, because it creates the conditions for equal opportunities and social participation.

What needs to be done: promoting of learning including adult learning

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have just given you rather gloomy figures, but there is good news as well. National and European action has begun to make a difference.

Over the last five years, Member States, together with the Commission and the Social Partners, have worked hard to reform their education and training systems.

They have agreed European benchmarks to measure progress and have engaged in a structured process of learning from experience and best practice across Europe.

Since 2000, Europe has made substantial progress; however, a lot more remains to be done. Let me show you how selected data compare against the benchmarks:

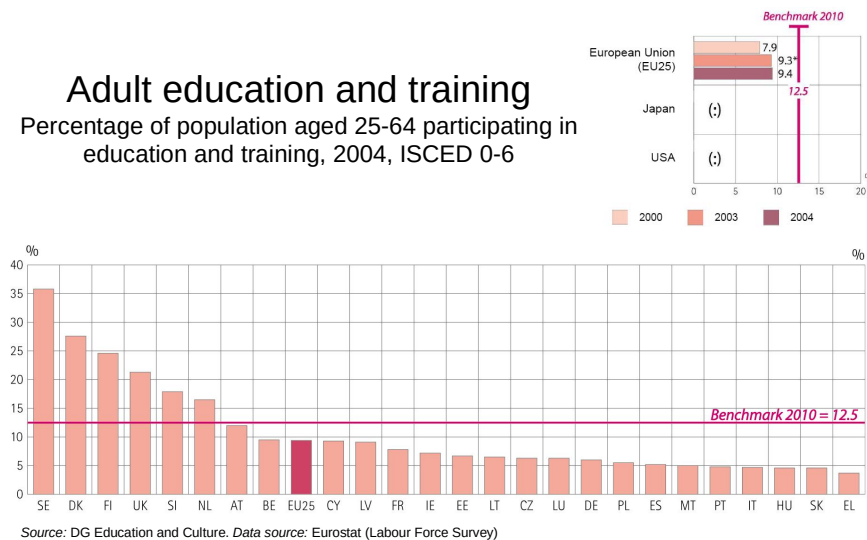


MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO MEET COMMITMENTS! (75 million low-skilled!)

Benchmark	2000	Today (2005)	Benchmark 2010
1. Early school leavers, (%)	17.3	14.9	10
2. MST graduates	650 000	755 000	750 000 (+15%)
3. Youth education attainment (up.sec %)	76.4	77.3	85
4. Low achieving 15 year olds, reading, %	19.4	19.8	-20% (15.5)
5. Participation in LLL, % of adults	7.9	10.8	12.5

Adult education and training

Percentage of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training, 2004, ISCED 0-6



You can see that progress has not been good especially in adult learning. Adult participation in formal and non-formal learning is alarmingly low; around 10% of the active population aged 25–64 takes part in it.

Clearly there's still a long way to go if we want to reach the EU benchmark of 12.5% (itself pretty low...) by 2010.

Only six EU countries are above this figure now. The rate for Germany is 6%, and many countries have participation rates at 5% or below.

Access to learning remains difficult for less-well educated adults, older people, and those working in SMEs.

Barriers stem mostly from lack of financing, time and motivation. Low participation also results from poor quality provision, and the lack of well designed and flexible courses that meet the needs of adults.

Adult learning must climb the political agenda in all Member States. I would like to call for concrete actions on the following key issues:

- increasing access and participation;
- raising the quality and outcomes of adult learning; and

- improving the coherence of policies and systems.

Firstly, increasing access and participation: existing obstacles to participation should be removed. In fact, adults need to be motivated and supported to remain in or resume learning.

For instance, this means improving the economic, social and personal returns through better recognition of prior learning and of learning outcomes.

Learning should also be brought closer to the learner. What I have in mind are local open-learning centres and better distance-learning systems.

Then, there is funding, which is always important. Public funds will always be needed to guarantee a sustainable infrastructure for formal and non-formal adult learning, and to provide for those who are most at risk of exclusion.

The second point is about quality and the outcomes of adult learning. Raising the quality and outcomes is an objective in its own right and also an important factor to raise motivation and participation.

A good quality assurance system will be essential; but teachers remain the number one factor.

We should focus on teachers: improving their initial education, promoting their professional development, and raising their status in society. Teachers should know how important they are for us.

Finally, more work should be done on the improvement of learning systems and policies. As you know well, adult learning is a complex world. It may be described as a 'rich mosaic' or as a 'confusing hodgepodge'.

One needs to recognise the complexity of adult learning to address the different needs.

Because policy-making is fragmented between many different actors, I believe that greater coherence and coordination is required. But this should not come at the cost of ignoring specific and local needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

These are the main issues I would like to bring to the attention of policy-makers and stakeholders.

To do that, the European Commission is now preparing a Communication on adult learning which will appear in the second half of the year.

I hope it will promote a wide debate across Europe and that this will in turn help to produce concrete steps forward.

However, the Commission has also the task to help things move from policy to implementation.

We will continue to fund initiatives launched by adult-learning organisations out in the field.

These funds will principally be distributed through Grundtvig; the sectoral programme part of the new Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme, for which Mrs Doris Pack, who is here with us today, is “rapporteur” in the European Parliament.

Conclusions

Meine Damen und Herren,

Zusammenfassend möchte ich sagen, dass Aus- und Weiterbildung eine intelligente Investition in die Zukunft ist. Es ist eine Investition in die Zukunft unserer Bürger und in die Zukunft unserer Wirtschaft und Gesellschaften.

Wir sind uns alle einig, dass es nun an der Zeit ist, von Worten zu Taten zu schreiten, und zwar auf allen Ebenen: auf europäischer, nationaler, regionaler und lokaler Ebene.

Unser wichtigster gemeinsamer Wert ist die Würde des Menschen. Daher ist „Sein“ immer mehr als „Haben“. In der Kultur des lebenslangen Lernens ist allerdings „Wissen“ mehr als „Haben“.

12 Sterne sind auf der Europäischen Flagge, 12 ist die Zahl der Vollkommenheit. Ich wünsche Ihnen allen, dass diese zwölfte Konferenz einen bedeutsamen Schritt und Fortschritt zur Strategie, des Systems und der Kultur des Lebenslangen Lernens in Deutschland, Europa und in die Welt ist.

Vielen Dank.