

Maroš Šefčovič—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Validating informal learning

FamCompass Conference

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Speech

[Greetings]

If you ask people about the work the EU does in education and training; chances are they will think of the Erasmus student–exchange scheme or of our support to the Bologna process.

This is all fine of course, but it is also a shame, because our policies are much broader than this.

You know that Lifelong Learning has been the core of our policies for a number of years now. Lifelong Learning includes

- all levels of formal education; from elementary schools, to the lofty heights of advanced studies and cutting–edge doctoral research;
- all forms of training, which is taken care of by the programme called Leonardo da Vinci;
- an external dimension; for instance, Erasmus Mundus and the Jean Monnet Programme; and finally
- Grundtvig for adult education, which is the programme that helped you carry out your project.

I'm reminding you of this because if we look at the overall picture we can better understand the breadth of our policies along another axis.

EU action spans from formal education to other types of learning, including the things we learn by doing. FamCompass is a perfect example of this latter kind of learning.

FamCompass exemplifies many of the objectives of our Grundtvig programme.

- It is a tool that can open up new learning pathways for adults and allow them to validate prior learning.
- It turns the home into an alternative learning place – and let us not forget that family learning and inter–generational learning are among the explicit aims of our action.
- But I left the most important aspect for last: FamCompass is clearly an attempt to engage more valuable groups.

It seems to me that if your portfolio were widely adopted, it would greatly benefit immigrants and other disadvantaged sectors of the population.

Why do I regard this as an important aspect of your work? Because education, training, and all other forms of learning have crucial social implications.

Next year will be the European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Learning – no matter where it takes place – is one of the main weapons in our fight against poverty.

We have known for a long time that schools and universities are the best social escalators. We all like the stories of bright kids of humble background who stand out in school and become prominent members of society.

In today's Europe, this traditional function of education is taking up a new dimension. Our centres of learning have also become the places where immigrants and their children can best integrate in our societies.

Among our actions in this field, we are giving a great deal of attention to the education of children of migrant background; especially to early school leaving, which affects many of them.

I would like to clarify one point here; our work on the education of children of migrant background should not be seen as something separate from our general commitment to increase the quality of education for all.

Looking at outputs from education – competences – rather than inputs is crucial in our efforts to combine equity and efficiency. And, given the rationale of your project, this insistence on competences is a point on which you will probably agree with me.

Our learning systems must adapt to the needs of our societies and economies; they must give all pupils – none excluded – the skills they need to participate in the knowledge society.

This means literacy, numeracy, and other subject-specific knowledge; but it also means acquiring softer skills and developing the right attitudes.

These are just as important to enable people to enter or re-enter the labour market and to continue learning throughout their lives.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The social implications of learning are not limited to schools, universities and learning centres. We all learn on the job, in our social interactions, and – on the basis of your own assumptions – in our families.

Looking at your project, I kept thinking of the young men and women who have recently settled in Europe from overseas and have nothing to show for their skills, brilliance, and ability to do hard work.

It is more and more difficult for people without qualifications to enter or re-enter the labour market and secure a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. For some, it is even difficult to be admitted to vocational courses.

We need to tackle this challenge, because the EU cannot afford to waste their talent and potential; and this both for moral and for economic reasons.

We must look for original and innovative solutions; and the portfolio you propose can be a step in the right direction.

I would like to comment on some aspects of the work you have carried out over the past two years.

First, I would like to congratulate you for your ability to pull together a truly European project. I can see that your network includes institutions from Belgium, Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and my native Slovakia. This must have been a cultural as well as an operational challenge!

Second, I was struck by the balanced mix of theoretical and applied research in your final publication.

It is clear that it takes a perfect command of your discipline to even imagine a tool for the assessment and validation of competences acquired in the family; but it is quite rare that this sort of knowledge can produce tangible instruments.

If one were to look for an example to illustrate the transition from creativity to innovation, FamCompass would be a good candidate. And there would no better time than 2009, the European Year of Creativity and Innovation.

Your attempt to measure abilities and skills that are inherently vague and general is an important step in the right direction.

I liked this aspect of your work for two reasons; first, because I believe that a measuring tool gives people confidence; it helps them become more aware of what they can do and it encourages them to develop their skills further.

Second, and more importantly, because learning institutions and employers are likely to be better disposed towards a portfolio of competences that has been designed and produced following an objective methodology that they can understand.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The phrase "Lifelong learning" has become current in almost every discourse about education and training in Europe – and you know this well because you are experts in the field.

From policy-making at national and regional level to academic debates, approaches based on the concept of lifelong learning have taken hold.

With your system of validating skills and competencies acquired outside of the formal education system, you have helped to take the concept from the level of debate to a practical application in everyday life, in helping them into employment.

And this is the best service we can offer to European citizens in the knowledge age.

Thank you.