



Open Letter to the EU Commission and the Member States, demanding a clear action regarding access to education, particularly e-learning, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

Honorable President von der Leyen,

Honorable President Michel,

In this time of need, Europe needs to step up to protect its future. The economic and social impact of the current health crisis is beginning to be felt. Governments and EU institutions focus on immediate measures to contain the crisis, as it is obvious that short-term imperatives have a mandated priority. **But managing the emergency must not mean that long-term planning should be put on hold.** It is precisely in these moments that responsible leaders need to think about the future generations.

The current crisis has exposed a huge flaw in our educational systems: **INEQUALITY**, both inside national systems and among EU member states. While, during the current crisis, the development of online instruments and platforms allowed many schools across Europe to continue their process in an almost normal rhythm, a huge number of pupils and students in many countries are deprived of such advantages. **We already knew that unequal access to education can have a highly detrimental impact on European economies and societies. Now we are witnessing a fast intensification of this inequality, which can have long-term negative effects on entire generations of children.** While some pupils can safely log onto their schools' online platform and carry on with their daily learning process from the safety of their own home, many others don't enjoy the luxury of a home computer or internet connection, many schools don't have access to such platforms and many teachers don't have the instruments they need to be able to continue courses. With each week that passes, the gap between these two worlds increases. And this unjust gap could decisively influence many European children's start in life, their future opportunities of having careers and fulfilling their dreams.

UNESCO has already highlighted several problems which were created by the lockdown mandated by an increasing number of public authorities, as at least 850 million of pupils and students have to stay away from educational establishments in more than 100 countries in the world. **School closures tend to disadvantage a proportionally higher number of students coming from under-privileged backgrounds, who can find very few other educational opportunities outside those offered by the educational system.** In the world and in the EU alike, many children belonging to groups exposed to a high risk of poverty are dependent of the free or discounted food they receive in schools and university for nutrition. The closure of the



educational system becomes a matter of direct survival for some of Europe's youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

Schools are not only a space for gaining competences and preparing for jobs. Education is also an important part of socializing, of transmitting and distilling the civic values, morals and virtues we strive nowadays to protect. In the poorest parts of Europe, schools are also one of the few safe spaces left to children.

At the same time, we must also understand that, while moving education online is the simplest solution, it raises several challenges that also need to be addressed. **Parents can only do so much to compensate the absence of teachers**, but they are not trained to teach, and, in many cases, they don't have the time to do this on top of performing their own jobs remotely. Moreover, the children of parents who do not enjoy the possibility of working from home, children raised by single parents, or children whose families simply don't have enough material resources are placed at a disadvantage. Moreover, moving schooling online raises the issue of broadband connectivity or online resources for many families, at a time when personal or household income is expected to take a significant hit.

Therefore, I believe that while the UNESCO appeal to create a global coalition to accelerate deployment of remote learning solutions is warranted, I believe that **the European Union needs to act too, in order to address the aforementioned challenges, in order to prevent the current crisis from increasing inequality, lowering social mobility and enhancing social exclusion and long-term poverty.**

The European Union and member states need **an EU created, funded and driven educational platform for European schools and universities.** While some educational establishments can appeal to available tools, a vast majority of schools and universities do not have access to an infrastructure ensuring quality educational solutions on a permanent basis. This makes the e-learning environment inequal both at European level as well as at national level. We need to develop the already existing EU educational tools in a common educational platform that could reduce the divides and generate an active educational community capable of becoming a resource center for teachers, pupils and parents across Europe. The advantages of such a platform are not only in terms of costs, but also in terms of access and quality – the priority is to ensure that as few children and students as possible are left out of the online educational system and that everyone has access to quality educational tools.

The European Union must urgently support the internet access to online resources and technology for children coming from underprivileged background. The same case can be made for **European teachers**, who, especially in rural areas, have less opportunities compared to their urban peers. If education must stay online while the public healthcare crisis rolls on, the teachers must be online too, and they too must be supported to have access to technology and



to the internet, as well. **Remote working tools** need to be financed in order to become tools to support the educational process in these difficult times. This can be done by creating a EU funded voucher scheme financing the access to the internet and the devices needed to access the education platforms.

In the same time, many other issues regarding education need to be raised. I would mention for instance the urgent **situation of the Erasmus students and professors still abroad** and the need to facilitate their speedy return, in safety, to their countries of origin. In the same time, **European universities** are also tremendously hit in every way: disruptions to the educational process, incredible pressure on students and professors alike, interruptions to the research projects etc. They too need support right now, in order to preserve their strong role in our communities. There are also **other operators in the education and training field** whose activities are also heavily impacted by the current disruptions, some of them being threatened with closure.

Many observers have argued that the current crisis could be a driver for enacting wide-ranging changes. Even in these dark moments there is ample room for hope, for improvement, for ingenuity and innovation, for solidarity and empathy, and we can find long-term solutions for improving our most vital systems, such as education. The education sector has been pushed to its limits and a wide number of dedicated teachers and innovators are rising to the challenge by currently developing new initiatives and innovative solutions in order to increase the access to quality education. **It is the duty of the European Union and the member states to help them in these trying times and to consider the access to education at EU level an urgency by identifying and implementing the solutions that are currently needed!**

Thank you for considering this letter and we are looking forward to your reply and our future cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

Victor NEGRESCU, MEP - Romania
Petra KAMMEREVERT, MEP - Germany
Eva MAYDELL, MEP - Bulgaria
Istvan UJHELYI, MEP - Hungary
Milan BRGLEZ, MEP - Slovenia
Alviina ALAMETSA, MEP - Finland
Attila ARA-KOVACS, MEP - Hungary
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