Meeting of chairpersons of transport, communications and education committees (European Parliament and national parliaments)
Session 1
Dublin, 17 June 2013

Minister Quinn,

distinguished participants,

It is a great honour for me to address this conference. As has always been the case during the Irish Presidency, the issues we have been invited to debate are very important and well-timed. The reasons why a new approach to education is needed are quite apparent, and they call for immediate action.

High levels of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment – currently at 23.5% at EU level, co-exist with two million unfilled vacancies. This points to a major problem in how we match the skills acquired through learning with those demanded in the labour market.

In addition, the demographic change that will lead to a significant percentage of people into retirement in the next decade, will, inevitably create a growing need for replacement: we already know now, for example, that by 2020 more than 60.000 doctors are expected to retire annually, while the influx of new healthcare professionals is currently far lower. In the field of transport we observe a similar trend, knowing that in railway transport 34% of employees are older than 50 today and that considerable efforts need to be made to attract young people to the sector.

And it is not only the pressure of an ageing workforce that affects these sectors. The entire workforce in all fields is faced with fast technological development and the growing trends towards a greener economy, for example. This will impact the types of jobs sought out and the types of new skills people will need to acquire. As a case in point: by 2020 five million jobs could be created in the energy efficiency and renewable energy sectors alone, but people will need adequate skills to be able to fill these openings.

A key point then, is that the required level of skills is changing upwards. It is projected that by 2020, 20% more jobs will demand higher level skills and increased adaptability. People will have to be equipped with more transversal skills which they can apply to the increasingly diverse and changing professional

pathways. For instance, according to the Digital Agenda, unless we act now Europe risks thaving 700,000 unfilled IT jobs by 2015,.

This is why the European Commission has called on Member States and other stakeholders to "rethink education", and proposed evidence-based advice to Member States on what they can do. Our Rethinking Education Communication and the accompanying Staff Working Documents set out the policy priorities for education and training systems for the next years. The communication calls on the Member States to put a renewed focus on:

- o the right skills to be delivered for the workplace;

- o what reforms will increase efficiency and inclusiveness of education;

- o with which resources and with whose involvement reforms should be achieved.

Among the actions announced in Rethinking Education, let me highlight just a few:

- to strengthen VET and work-based learning, to pair up school learning and hands-on experience, both of which are useful for later employment, an EU Alliance for Apprenticeships will be set up in July 2013;

- by 2015, a European Area for Skills and Qualifications will be in place to promote mobility and allow employers to understand qualifications better, leading to easier job search, also between countries;

- to promote the acquisition of transversal skills, policy guidance on entrepreneurship education, and a range of other tools will be put in place as of 2013;

- moreover, the Commission plans to initiate EU-level debates about the benefits of investment in different education and training sectors and ways to increase efficiency of spending, as well as to explore with social partners how to raise the level of training for employees.

In the field of education and training the primary responsibility is of course with the Member States. The EU has nonetheless an important supportive role to play.

The Commission will give enhanced support to Member States through its feeding into the European Semester and the country-specific recommendations, through a stronger peer learning process, and through regular monitoring of education and training benchmarks.

This year's Country-Specific Recommendations were proposed by the Commission at the end of May. They include many

education-related recommendations on challenges such as reducing early school leaving (for 6 countries), youth unemployment (for 17 countries), improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged learners (for 9 countries), and improving the quality and availability of early childhood education and care (10 countries).

This approach, based on strong partnerships with the Member States, is essential in order to find solutions to the challenges we face in the field of education.

Considering the importance of partnerships, the Commission will promote and support these at all levels, in order to better adapt education and training systems to the needs of employers. The proposed Erasmus for All funding programme, starting in 2014, will for example support national-level efforts such as Knowledge Alliances, which are meant to stimulate the sharing, exchange and flow of knowledge between higher education institutions and enterprises. The aim is to create a curricula together so as to promote skills such as entrepreneurship, real-time problem solving and creative thinking, perhaps to look into how to attract more students into STEM subjects.

In the VET arena, similarly, EU funding will be provided to Sector Skills Alliances, uniting training institutions, enterprises

and professional organisations; these will work to design curricula and training programmes, also at the national level.

The specific focus of this session is on the challenges and solutions that the digital era brings. This issue is an essential element within the wider agenda of "rethinking education".

Digital technologies provide unprecedented opportunities for education and training. Knowledge is now available with one click, and individuals can learn everywhere, at any time and following flexible and personalised pathways.

Internet has led to emerging and disruptive phenomena like open access, open source or, in the education and training field, Open Educational Resources (OER). Open Educational Resources are teaching, learning or research materials that are in the public domain or released with an intellectual property license that allows for free use, adaptation, and distribution. The best example is probably the explosion of the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). In less than two years, the most famous MOOCs platform has more than three million users around the globe.

OER are a necessary catalyst to develop educational methods that enrich the quality of the learning experience with practices

based on collaboration, contextualisation and personalisation. By stimulating cooperative work content, creators collaborate with users (often peers) through the re-use and sharing of resources that are adapted to learning contexts and learners' needs. These resources introduce innovative teaching and learning practices and contribute to open and flexible learning environments.

However, despite the presence of digital technologies in all facets of our lives – from work to leisure – and despite the explosion of Open Educational Resources like MOOCs, education and training systems are still unable to integrate ICT in their teaching and learning practices. Some illustrative data: In higher education, Coursera has already more than three million users, but only eight EU universities are involved (plus one from Switzerland). Europe lags behind: according to a recent European University Association survey, the concept of MOOC is unknown in one third of the 200 European universities that were consulted; and another third have merely internally discussed the topic.

"Integration of ICT" does not mean having and using more electronic devices or more broadband connections in the classrooms. It is not a quantitative issue, but a qualitative one: it does not mean "using more", but "using better", exploiting their innovative pedagogical potential to enhance the learning

experience. Finland is a good example. According to a recent survey carried out by European Schoolnet and the University of Liège, Finland is one of the countries that uses the least digital tools in the classrooms (only 20% of 4th grade pupils attend classes where the teacher uses ICT in more than 25% of lessons, in 8th grade the rate is 29%); and yet the country shows better results in terms of digital competences.

Strengthening the integration of digital technologies and contents in formal, non-formal and informal education and training is the core objective of the forthcoming "Opening up Education" initiative. This should help to raise the provision of skills needed by the current and future generations of students and workers and to increase efficiency of the delivery of education and training in the EU.

Online resources are also an important tool for international cooperation. This is why the Commission, in its forthcoming Communication on "European Higher Education in the World", encourages Member States and higher education institutions to develop opportunities for international collaboration via online learning. And the Commission wants them to expand the use of ICT and Open Education Resources for new delivery modes to widen access, internationalise curricula and pave the way for new forms of partnerships.

All Member States are investing important amounts towards similar objectives but often with unequal results and, sometimes without continuity in time. The fragmented nature of such policies and actions, as well as the fact that projects are not always financially sustainable in the long term, represents a serious problem in terms of efficiency.

"Opening up Education" will call for a more coherent strategy - through a coordinated action of Member States and stakeholders – so as to stimulate, with the use of these technologies, innovation in mainstream education and training.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe, whose main competitive advantage is its human capital, is lagging behind.

Without a coherent and coordinated action between Member States and stakeholders, current problems like the digital divide, digital skills gaps and mismatches or the efficiency of ICT investments in education and training systems will increase. And at the same time, Europe will become more and more dependent on technologies designed and produced abroad.

This is why the time to act is now. With "Rethinking Education" and "Opening up Education", the Commission is proposing a framework for common action.

Thank you for your attention.