

Brussels, 1 February 2011

Commission launches high-level expert group on literacy chaired by Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands

One in five 15-year-olds in Europe, as well as many adults, lack basic reading and writing skills, which makes it harder for them to find a job and puts them at risk of social exclusion. To help tackle the issue, the European Commission has set up an independent group of experts to identify ways of raising literacy levels. The group, which met for the first time today in Brussels, is chaired by Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, who is a Special Envoy on Literacy for Development for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). EU Ministers have set a target of reducing the share of pupils with difficulties in reading, maths and science to fewer than 15% by 2020.

Androulla Vassiliou, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, said: *"The launch of this group marks the start of a Europe-wide campaign to address the root causes of low literacy levels. Too many Europeans find themselves locked out of the job market and find it hard to contribute fully to society because they lack basic reading and writing skills. If we want to achieve our Europe 2020 goals for smart and inclusive growth, we must act now to tackle this problem."*

Princess Laurentien added: "I greatly welcome this initiative as it is high time Europe faces up to the uncomfortable reality of high levels of illiteracy within its borders. This initiative will help address the taboo that exists to this day. Illiteracy stands in the way of economic growth and inclusiveness. By tackling illiteracy, we are also likely to contribute to solutions in a range of other areas, such as poverty, employability and healthy living. Together with the experts, we hope to provide a bold vision on the issues to be addressed and how literacy can help us creating strong, competitive economies and healthy societies within the EU."

Raising literacy levels in Europe

The [latest results](#) of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a worldwide survey on the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science, show that one in five, or 20%, has low reading skills. The findings, compiled every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), mean that Europe has slightly improved since 2000. But greater efforts will be needed if EU countries are to achieve their target of fewer than 15% of low performers in reading, maths and science by 2020.

For adults the need for action is just as urgent. Almost 80 million adults in Europe – a third of the workforce - have only low or basic skills, but estimates show that share of jobs requiring high qualifications will increase to 35% by the end of the decade, compared to 29% now. Reading and writing are essential skills, not least as they are the key to further learning.

The EU's plans to raise literacy levels are linked to the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives "[Youth on the Move](#)" and "[Agenda for New Skills and Jobs](#)", which both aim to improve skills levels in Europe through better quality of education and training.

Objective of High-Level Group on Literacy

The objective of the High-Level Group on Literacy is to give visibility and political importance to the issue of raising literacy levels in Europe. It will analyse scientific evidence and evaluate what policies work best. The 11 members of the group are experts on literacy from academia, politics and business. Click here for [biographies and comments from the members](#).

Next steps

The High-Level Group will meet regularly over the coming 18 months and will present policy proposals to the Commission in mid-2012. Based on the group's proposals, Commissioner Vassiliou will present recommendations to Education Ministers in autumn 2012. On this basis, Member States and the Commission will take the issue further as part of their strategic co-operation framework on education and training ("Education and Training 2020").

More information:

European Commission: [Education and training](#)

European Commission: [Europe 2020](#)

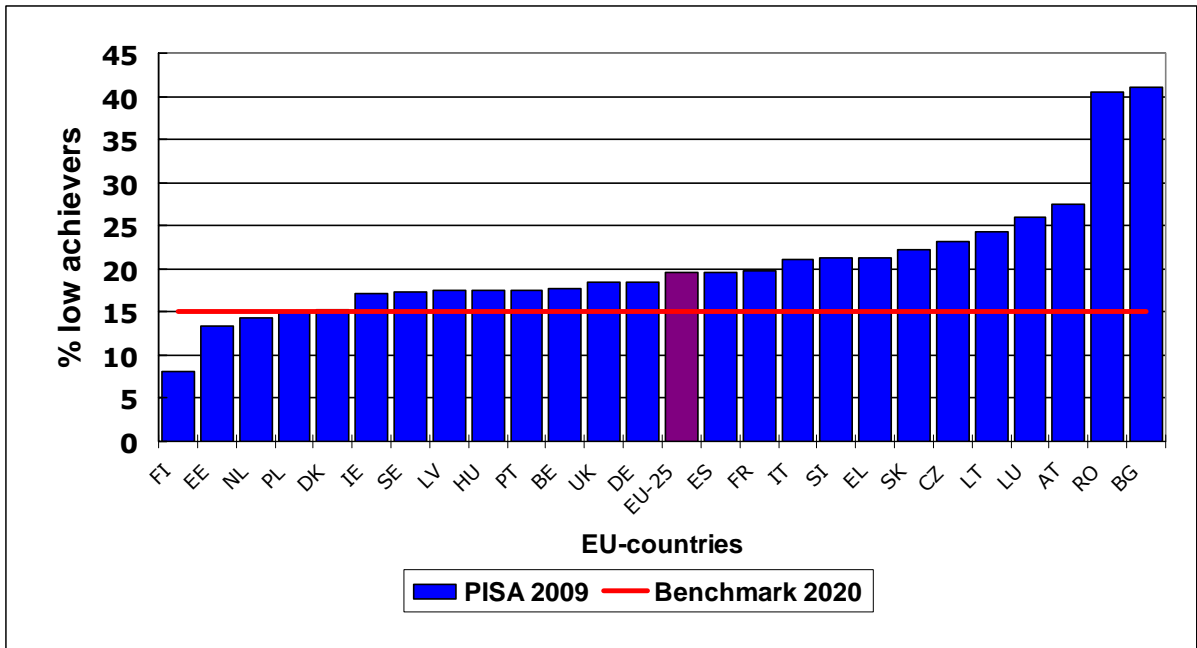
ANNEX

1) Percentage of low achievers in reading, PISA 2000-2009¹

	2000	2003	2006	2009	Change 2006-2009 (percentage points)
Austria	19.3	20.7	21.5	27.5	+6.0
Belgium	19.0	17.9	19.4	17.7	-1.7
Bulgaria	40.3	:	51.1	41.0	-10.1
Czech Republic	17.5	19.4	24.8	23.1	-1.7
Denmark	17.9	16.5	16.0	15.2	-0.8
Estonia	:	:	13.6	13.3	-0.3
EU (25 countries)			23.1	19.6	-3.5
Finland	7.0	5.7	4.8	8.1	+3.3
France	15.2	17.5	21.7	19.8	-1.9
Germany	22.6	22.3	20.0	18.5	-1.5
Greece	24.4	25.2	27.7	21.3	-6.4
Hungary	22.7	20.5	20.6	17.6	-3.0
Ireland	11.0	11.0	12.1	17.2	+5.1
Italy	18.9	23.9	26.4	21.0	-5.4
Latvia	30.1	18.0	21.2	17.6	-3.6
Lithuania	:	:	25.7	24.3	-1.4
Luxembourg	(35.1)	22.7	22.9	26.0	+3.1
Netherlands	(9.5)	11.5	15.1	14.3	-0.8
Poland	23.2	16.8	16.2	15.0	-1.2
Portugal	26.3	22.0	24.9	17.6	-7.2
Romania	41.3	:	53.5	40.4	-13.1
Slovakia	:	24.9	27.8	22.3	-5.5
Slovenia	:	:	16.5	21.2	+4.7
Spain	16.3	21.1	25.7	19.6	-6.1
Sweden	12.6	13.3	15.3	17.4	+2.1
UK	(12.8)	:	19.0	18.4	-0.4
: No data available					
UK, LU, NL: 2000 results not comparable to later years					

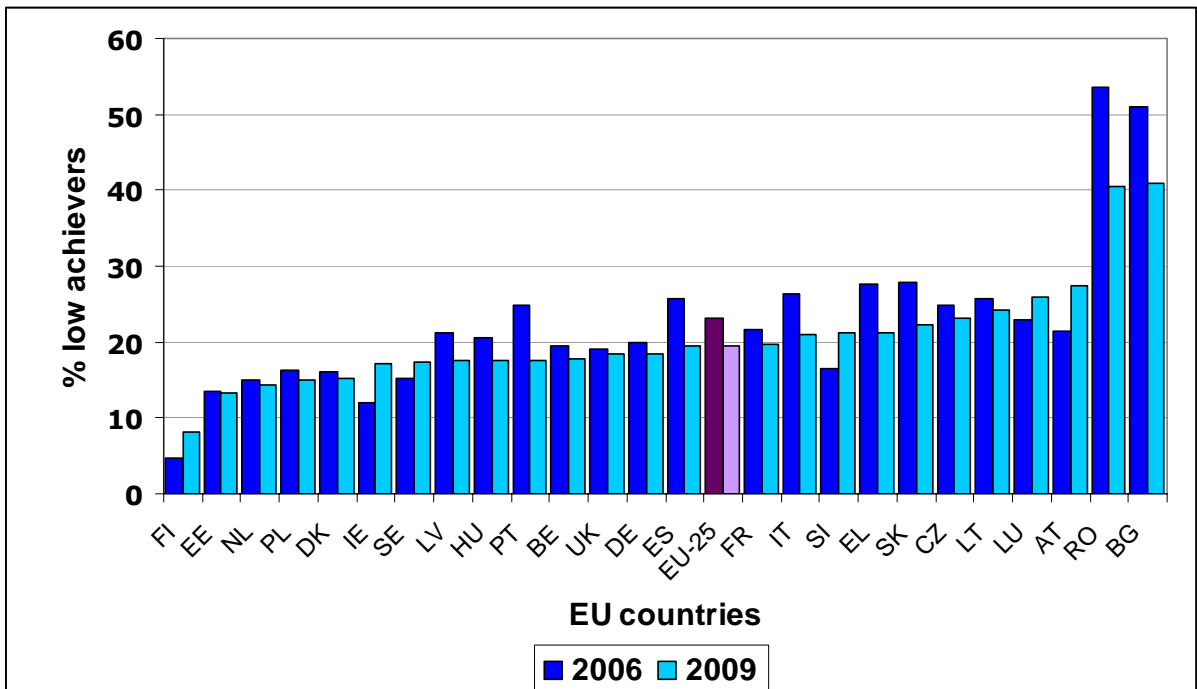
2) Low achievers in reading (2009)

¹ **Low achievers in reading literacy** are those pupils who are capable of completing only the least complex reading tasks such as locating a single piece of information, identifying the main theme of a text, or making a simple connection with everyday knowledge. This is based on the **OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** survey in which scores range from level 1 to level 5 (highest level). Low achievers in reading are those who score below level 2.



Source: OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

3) Changes in reading performance between 2006-2009



Source: OECD, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)