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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION

REVIEW OF REACTIONS TO THE WHITE PAPER

“TEACHING AND LEARNING: TOWARDS THE LEARNING SOCIETY”

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The European Commission launched a fundamental public debate when it asked the Community institutions, the Member States, the social partners, employers' federations, universities and research institutes and NGOs to examine the White Paper *“Teaching and learning: towards the learning society”*.

The reactions, opinions and comments the Commission thus gathered dovetail with one of the central conclusions drawn from the European Year of Lifelong Learning, viz. that people in Europe are increasingly aware of the need to build on their knowledge and their occupational skills throughout life. They are conscious of how crucial this is both as regards getting into employment and as regards integrating into social life and being active citizens.

The political contribution of the White Paper, in which education and training provide the key to a blueprint for society, deserves to be stressed. The Commission has sought to give this prospect substance and convince as wide a public as possible of the need to bring about a knowledge-based society in the interests of a Europe which is thus more competitive, and more fully aware of itself and its values.

The purpose of this communication is to distil the main policy signals from the discussions of the past 18 months. The Commission takes this opportunity to stress the quality and depth of the reactions which have already contributed to informing and adjusting its present action and to preparing the future. There have been significant contributions from the Community institutions, particularly the Council with its conclusions of 6 May 1996, and the European Parliament. The reactions have, moreover, made it possible to launch experiments which are reported on in this communication. In parallel with this, the ideas set out in the White Paper have been examined in depth by the Study Group on Education and Training.

I. THE FOUNDATIONS OF A EUROPEAN UNION OF KNOWLEDGE

The discussion of the White Paper and the reactions it generated have helped to lay the foundations of a European Union of knowledge and have largely confirmed the main themes which appear in this text.

- **Economic basis**

In an economic context of globalisation and new forms of competition, improving education and training can help to strengthen growth and competitiveness in Europe. This bears out the analysis derived from the thinking set out in the White Paper *“Growth, competitiveness, employment”*. The links between education, training and employment are recognised by everyone, particularly by the employers' representatives, while the reactions of the representatives of the world of education warn against excessive gearing of education and training systems to the current structure of employment.

- **Human values**

As stated in the White Paper, the need not to think purely in terms of the economic aspects of development, but to consider the personal fulfilment and forming of the individual as part of the essential objectives of education and training, is stressed time and again. The Council feels that the cultural and formative aspects of education and training should be highlighted, while the European Parliament asks that the social, affective, moral and spiritual aspects be taken into account. The expression 'learning society' is sometimes not clearly understood; it is important to avoid an excessively narrow interpretation of it. On the contrary, the idea is to open up access to knowledge for everyone.

- **Social basis**

The White Paper's analysis is grounded in a social model which rejects the idea of a society which leaves some of its members out in the cold and creates a rift between the 'knowledge haves' and the 'knowledge have-nots'. The Council, the European Parliament, the ETUC and the NGOs, fearing further social exclusion, advocate stepping up the fight for equal opportunities. Although the plight of young people should not be underestimated, the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee, along with other institutions, would also like to see emphasis placed specifically on the problems encountered by women, young children, adult workers and all the disadvantaged categories of people - the disabled, the elderly, the long term unemployed, ethnic minorities - who, for one reason or another, face the risk of social exclusion. There are many calls for a new dialogue bringing together all the players, particularly the social partners, and for local partnerships established between the local and regional authorities, NGOs and the community at large.

- **Lifelong learning**

The idea of lifelong learning is now very widely supported. It is part and parcel of the concept of a knowledge-based society. It is an objective which will tap the potential offered by the tools of the information society and shows the relevance of action dovetailing the two areas of education and training. Everyone acknowledges the need to improve convergence between general and vocational education, and to give vocational training in general a higher standing. The importance of this objective is brought home to us in no uncertain terms by the prospect of having to face up to the challenge of an ageing European population, as the European Parliament reminds us.

- **New technologies**

Putting the concept of lifelong learning into practice entails the use of information techniques which everyone will have to come to terms with as instruments of communication and work. The emergence of the information society is widely accepted as being conducive to the development of a dynamic exchange process, particularly through the use of interactive networks via dedicated Internet sites. The assessment and accreditation of skills therefore seems set to make considerable headway through the promotion of new IT-based tools.

- **The political mobilisation of the Member States of the European Union**

The knowledge-based society is not going to come about as a matter of course, and the type of policies and action needed to make it happen have to be thought out. There is virtual unanimity on the primary role of the Member States and the need to abide by the principle of subsidiarity when it comes to the content and organisation of education and vocational training systems. Yet at the same time regrets are expressed that these systems have not been analysed in sufficient detail, for they display certain rigidities which hamper the modernisation they so badly need, although there are instances of innovation which can serve as a basis for instituting the necessary changes. In its conclusions, the Council states that the analysis needed could well open up new areas of co-operation at Community level. This opens up new prospects for co-operation on education and training and confirms the importance of the Commission's role in analysis.

- **Adjusting to developments**

The advent of the knowledge-based society raises questions as to how the various players will react. It is generally agreed that the emergence of the information society will give everyone ever-wider access to a range of educational resources and that this will call for a change in attitudes. There remains, however, the sensitive issue of how to reconcile the responsibilities which fall to the education systems and institutions on the one hand and, on the other, the development of modes of learning and the role to be played by individuals themselves. The European Parliament considers that it is up to the public sector rather than to individuals to secure universal access to education. The importance of information (data bases, indicators, etc.) and guidance arrangements has been emphasised in order not to leave the individual alone and at a loss. The vital role of the teaching approach which forges the link between the individual and knowledge has been repeatedly stressed. Many reactions have also stressed the role of the family and the immediate environment, and there is unanimous acknowledgement the primordial importance of the training of teachers and trainers.

- **Finding the necessary resources**

The European Parliament is worried by the fall - in relative terms - in public expenditure on education and training. If action to make Europe an open area of education for all its citizens were to be a political priority, the potential budgetary impact would be discussed in the context of the future financial perspectives. The European Parliament urges the budgetary authority to increase funding for the *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Socrates* programmes in order to finance the new objectives arising from the establishment of the knowledge-based society.

II. EXPERIMENTS IN PROGRESS

The White Paper proposed experiments as part of the action programmes and using the financial resources allocated to them. The Commission has launched this experimental phase, taking into account the comments, reactions and opinions received from the discussions. These have prompted the Commission to refine and

adjust the guidelines initially established for the implementation of the objectives of the White Paper.

Objective I: Accreditation of skills and the principle of the “personal skills card”

a) Preliminary conclusions

The aim is to conduct experiments in areas and with methods which are radically new. While the need to take better account of workers' informal experiential learning, as suggested by the ETUC, is understood and accepted, the principle itself elicits questions which the discussions have helped to answer.

The accreditation of skills is not intended to take the place of the traditional formal qualifications nor to devalue the recognition of qualifications issued by the school system, and certainly not to install a new tier of European bureaucracy. The ETUC expresses doubts as to the exact notion of skill, but is interested by the idea of a “personal skills card”. The vast majority of employers' organisations, however, wonder just how feasible such approaches are.

In this connection, the thematic conference provided an opportunity for a demonstration of the prototype of a skills evaluation software programme for mathematics which could be put out over the Internet.

b) Implementation

Information to the public on the option of automated validation using computerised multimedia techniques have cleared up misunderstandings and made it possible to identify certain transnational teams eager to try out this approach. 34 projects have been selected, covering a wide range of subjects and occupational areas. There are pilot projects on: i) basic knowledge (maths, physics, chemistry, drafting skills, languages, geography, environment/water); ii) technical and occupational knowledge (banking-related professions, marketing, assembly, informatics, office technology, industrial processes, customer service, law, chemistry, biology, statistics; iii) key skills (also called horizontal skills). An example is the **Dialang** project, the purpose of which is to design a system to enable every citizen to evaluate his/her level of proficiency in any of 15 European languages. Further experimental projects in occupational fields not yet covered are envisaged in 1997. The Commission is also conducting a study on the situation in the USA and in Europe with regard to automated evaluation and personal skills cards.

The projects are designed to compile a reference compendium of knowledge and skills arranged into elementary units which will provide a basis for developing interactive evaluation software which can be put out over the Internet and whereby the level achieved by the candidate can be validated.

Despite the controversial nature of the automated option, the response is positive and shows that a genuine demand exists among individuals, the business sector and trade organisations. The objective of opening up access to recognition of knowledge and individual skills, and giving everyone the opportunity to update their skills, is welcomed.

Many argue that a less systematically automatic approach to the process would consolidate the impact of the experimental project for accreditation of skills. The

success of the accreditation project can be guaranteed only if it is part of a genuine economic process and caters for a real need which the professional circles concerned have identified and are committed to tackling.

In this connection, it would be a good idea to reposition the project in the context of the transparency of skills and qualifications at national and European levels. This would enable the project to benefit from the existing momentum generated by the Green Paper "*The obstacles to transnational mobility*" and by the action plan, "*Learning in the information society*". A start is being made on this with the various sectors concerned.

The implementation of this objective has also led to the launching of a joint call for proposals¹ by the Education Multimedia Task Force aimed at the development of new pedagogic tools which will enable people in Europe to train more effectively and help their teaching establishments to rise to the challenge of the information society.

Objective II: Bringing schools and the business sector closer together and developing apprenticeships

a) Preliminary conclusions

Against a backdrop of alarmingly high unemployment there is broad support for the principle of bringing the school and the business sector closer together. But, as the Council and the EP stress, this does not mean gearing education to the sole requirements of the business sector as a matter of course. The idea of a European framework for apprentices is also warmly received as a reference instrument at the European level in order to smooth the way for mobility and emphasise the need for high-quality apprenticeships.

Comments made during the discussions have prompted the Commission to clarify its view that there is no single model of apprenticeship which should be considered as the only channel leading to vocational training - which is what the ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education) was afraid of - but that, on the contrary, there is a need to open up and diversify apprenticeship and sandwich training, smoothing the way for travelling apprenticeships in the European Union by making it easier for skills acquired to be mutually recognised.

The UEAPME (European Union of SMEs) considers the introduction of a European apprenticeship scheme to be desirable provided it removes the obstacles relating to social protection and administrative obstacles, while the UNICE fully subscribes to the aim of expanding apprenticeship while taking full account of specific national features.

The discussions have allowed considerable progress to be made in the definition of the conditions for the success of the education partnership based on apprenticeship arrangements.

¹ This joint call for proposals by the Education Multimedia Task Force concerns the Telematics Applications, Esprit, TSER, *Socrates*, *Leonardo* and Ten-telecom programmes. The projects selected (end June 1997) will relate to the innovatory tools, services and contents for schools, universities, vocational training centres and companies, including SMEs.

b) Implementation

With the definition of the annual priorities for the *Leonardo* programme, special emphasis was laid on the development of co-operation between education establishments and the business sector. The Commission has thus supported the development of transnational initial training placement and exchange programmes - particularly targeting young workers and those young persons undertaking apprenticeship-based training or sandwich training. It has also consolidated the transnational in-company placement programmes for young university students, taking care to ensure that this training is taken into due account by their home university. The number of young people benefiting from a European mobility grant for vocational training will reach 100 000 in 1998 (compared with 20 000 in 1995).

Both these channels of training, i.e. initial training as part of school education and the more traditional model of apprenticeship, are the expression of different cultural traditions, so they can develop and flourish only if they are implemented with the proper accent on quality and do not lock the recipients into jobs considered as lower-skilled. This is why the Commission has also provided support for the development of apprenticeship and sandwich training in higher education.

Two ambitious ventures are currently in progress. They presuppose the removal of certain legal and administrative obstacles to transnational mobility for people undergoing training. The first is the development of an "Erasmus for apprentices", as proposed in the White Paper, and the second is the preparation of a European apprentices' charter which fully complies with the principle of subsidiarity set out in the Treaty and paves the way for the expansion of Europe-wide training schemes based on apprenticeship and sandwich training. It is important to stress the political value of the step taken, which is intended to help to strengthen these training channels in the Member States while taking due account of the European dimension.

The Commission has also supported a venture which has enabled 500 teachers to undertake an in-company placement in order to strengthen links between general education and the business world. Several partnerships set up under Community programmes have made co-operation between school and industry the focus of their education project. This venture also led to projects bringing together training establishments and companies in order to introduce teachers to enterprise culture.

Objective III: Combating exclusion through education and training

a) Preliminary conclusions

Everything must be done to fight against exclusion. The problem has taken on new proportions and could get even worse. This is why the White Paper proposes, as an experimental project, the concept of the second-chance school.

The misgivings expressed during the discussions on this concept have helped to clarify this approach. There is no question of trying to make out that ordinary school is no longer capable of catering for all children, nor of forming ghettos, as the IRDAC and the ETUC put it. As the Council writes, there is first a need to improve the quality of initial education and training systems in order to forestall failure. However, the Member States, the ESC and some NGOs consider it essential to give a second chance to those young people who did not complete their

schooling, left with no qualifications and consequently find themselves in a situation of exclusion.

There is support in many of the reactions, particularly those of the EP, the Committee of the Regions and several associations, for the idea of giving every person the opportunity of education and training throughout life.

b) Implementation

In conjunction with the governments concerned, the Commission is supporting pilot projects for the social and economic reintegration of young people past school-leaving age who are facing the greatest difficulties. The concept of the 'second-chance schools' is based on:

- a solid and durable partnership between local authorities, the social services, voluntary bodies and the public and private sectors, the latter being involved in defining the training route and offering young people mentoring and real job prospects;
- a teaching approach tailored to the needs and aspirations of young people, which will make the best of a young person's natural talents by helping him to rebuild self-esteem, a factor which is so essential to (re)integration in society;
- a central role for the use of new technologies which will place the young person in a new, stimulating learning environment.

The concept must be left open to cater for the great diversity of social, economic, cultural and institutional structures of the Member States, for these will to a large extent determine the features of each project. There is absolutely no question of imposing institutionalisation of a specific arrangement and the point is to take an experimental approach.

Following the very successful conference for the launching of the second-chance school held in Marseilles on 9-10 December 1996, other pilot projects will be launched in Bilbao (Spain), Catania (Italy), Hämeenlinna (Finland), Setúbal (Portugal) and Attiki (Greece). Additional pilot projects will be confirmed by the national authorities by the end of 1997. It is encouraging to note that the concept of the second-chance school has found its way into some national programmes to tackle exclusion.

In addition, in order to build on the outstanding endeavours and achievements in the various Member States, an extensive exchange network will be set up to develop synergy and make the best use of existing schemes to achieve the social and economic reintegration of excluded young people. This network will help to illustrate the relevance of this approach.

Objective IV: Proficiency in three Community languages and awarding a European quality label

a) Preliminary conclusions

While the Commission's objective of enabling everyone to communicate in two European languages in addition to his or her mother tongue is considered essential for the promotion of European citizenship and access to employment, the

discussions have stressed the special place to be given to mastering one's mother tongue and the advantages of a working understanding of one or more foreign languages, as stated by the European Parliament.

Many misgivings have been expressed that the proposed European label might highlight the differences which exist between the education policies of different countries and that by seeking to point to the best - or the worst - from any point of view involves the risk of perpetuating disparities rather than attenuating them. This is why the Commission has proposed awarding a label for innovatory initiatives in language learning. This proposal has been taken on board by the Council.

In addition to this encouragement for innovation, the reactions and comments stressed the need to:

- give greater thought to the role of the language teacher and the specific context of adult language learning;
- place the learner at the heart of a teaching process designed to seek continuous improvement and make use of the new information technologies;
- encourage mobility among teachers and learners, young and adult alike.

b) Implementation

The **European quality label** will be awarded to innovatory language learning initiatives. The Commission has set up an *ad hoc* working party, comprising representatives of the Member States themselves, in order to define how this label is to be awarded.

Early language teaching, the advantages of which are widely recognised, is being analysed and discussed in order to work out the right approach.

Bilingual or multi-lingual teaching. There is a wide variety of experience in Europe when it comes to using a foreign language as the medium of teaching. This type of teaching will be encouraged by providing specific training for the teachers concerned and assistance in the preparation of curricula and teaching material.

The **cross-comprehension of languages or initiation into multilingual comprehension** (i.e. understanding other languages, but not necessarily speaking them) is considered to be a promising approach on account of its potential for improving communication between the citizens of Europe. It involves taking advantage of points of similarity between the languages of a given family. Meetings and discussions on this theme will help to decide on the best way of promoting this approach.

It is important to be able to evaluate the **quality of materials and methods**. A guide will be prepared to help teachers, teacher trainers, authors and publishers so that this can be pursued more easily at the European level. An international network of existing servers is also envisaged so that **information and material can be exchanged**.

In view of the fact that he is called upon to work in a constantly changing environment, and of the need to raise standards for teaching adult learners, the role of the **language teacher** will be the subject of an in-depth analysis.

Objective V: Putting tangible investment and training investment on an equal footing

a) Preliminary conclusions

The objective has been approved insofar as there is general recognition of the need to increase training investment and to develop new policies for investment in knowledge and skills.

The Commission concludes from the discussions that there is a need to readjust expenditure among the different players involved and for a new relationship between tangible investment and training investment. It notes that there is a need for major changes in approach, behaviour and even mentality, particularly for companies and those who determine public and private investment, in order to redress the balance towards intangible investment, a factor which plays an increasingly central role in modern economies. The EP's view is that the public authorities' mission is to prepare the most appropriate (fiscal, legislative and social) environment.

b) Implementation

The implementation of this objective involves three main aspects.

- First and foremost, the question of funding of education at the European level: an important step forward has been accomplished with the agreement of all the Member States to take part in a first publication offering a comparative approach to funding the different levels of education. A policy debate on this issue will then be launched at the highest level.
- Secondly, the identification and analysis of the rationale of fiscal and accounting practices and arrangements used by Member States to encourage investment in training. This "*Study on the accounting and fiscal arrangements capable of putting investment in capital and investment in training on an equal footing*" will have two major objectives:
 - first, to make an inventory of the main accounting and fiscal approaches in the Member States to investment in training for individuals and companies;
 - secondly, a preliminary cost-effectiveness assessment of incentives designed to promote investment in training, based on an examination of the different types of arrangements.

An inventory of this kind, which should be available for the end of 1997, will provide the starting point for an experts' meeting to circumscribe the issues involved and, in particular, to identify "good practices" capable of supporting the development of initiatives in this area.

- Lastly, to speak of investment in training presupposes better knowledge of the relation between costs and benefits inherent in this training. The results of this study are expected by the end of March 1998 and should make it possible to identify a reliable indicator to measure in comparable terms over time, by country and by sector, the skills shortages which may reflect a lack of training and generate a higher level of unemployment - and to study the feasibility of a

research programme to examine the relationship between skills shortages and employment and unemployment in Europe.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

This stocktaking of the discussions generated by the White Paper and the presentation of the first results of the experiments in progress will be supplemented by a working document setting out the positions expressed during the thematic conferences.

The Commission's intention is to conduct this current experimental phase the greatest care and carry out a painstaking evaluation which will be produced in 1998. The first results of this work will be widely disseminated among the public and private parties concerned.

Preparatory work will be carried out in order to identify the legal instruments which would give a greater political weight to the objectives of the White Paper and to the results of this experimental phase. This process is already under way for the European apprentices' charter.

The process of reforming the Structural Funds for the next programming period beginning in 2000 will be informed by the White Paper debate, which confirms that investment in human resources is vital to a competitive European economy and to the level and quality of employment in Europe. The Commission will do its utmost to ensure that intangible investment fulfils its essential role.

In the second half of 1997 the Commission will present broad guidelines to open the discussions on the future of the action programmes in the areas of education, training and youth. This guideline document will seek to specify how the new generation of Community action programmes could contribute to the general objective of lifelong learning.

A major drive is needed in education and training if the knowledge-based Union, seen as a European area of access to knowledge and skills, is to become a reality. It is ultimately for this edifice that the White Paper '*Teaching and learning: towards the learning society*' sought to provide the cornerstone. The depth of the discussions and debates it has generated confirms that it is responding to the concerns and aspirations of individuals across Europe.

