



Committee of the Regions

EDUC-IV-010

**68th plenary session
13 and 14 February 2007**

**OPINION
of the Committee of the Regions
on
EFFICIENCY AND EQUITY IN EUROPEAN EDUCATION AND
TRAINING SYSTEMS
AND
THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG
LEARNING**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- notes that exclusion from the educational system is the first step towards marginalisation followed by exclusion from the employment system and from cultural, social and civic life. It reiterates the importance of combating school drop outs which have negative effects on competitiveness and cohesion;
- recognises that in the long run pre-primary education and targeted early intervention programmes bring the highest rates of return over the whole lifelong learning process, especially for the most disadvantaged and recalls in this respect the necessity of the cross-sectoral approach in which key responsibilities are held by local and regional authorities;
- agrees that modernisation of higher education is a crucial factor in the rapidly evolving knowledge society. Higher education institutions are at the heart of the "knowledge triangle" given their interlinked roles of education, research and innovation. Local and regional authorities play a key role in channelling funding towards the modernisation of higher education systems;
- expresses support for the double objective of improving transparency of qualifications while promoting increased mobility in the EU, but insists that qualifications frameworks should continue to be developed at national and regional level. Responsibility for reform must therefore remain in the hands of the competent authorities within the Member States.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on *Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems* COM(2006) 481 final - SEC(2006) 1096;

Having regard to the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on *the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning* COM(2006) 479 final;

Having regard to the Opinion on the *Integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning*, CdR 258/2004 fin¹;

Having regard to the report and recommendations that arose from the second test consultation of the subsidiarity/proportionality monitoring network (DI/CdR 2/2007), which currently numbers 49 partners and was set up in the context of the Committee opinions on *Better Lawmaking 2004* (CdR 121/2005 fin) and on *Guidelines for the application and monitoring of the subsidiarity and proportionality principles* (CdR 220/2004 fin);

Having regard to the Council decision of 19 October 2006 to request its opinion on this subject, under Article 265(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of the Bureau of 25 April 2006 to instruct its Commission for Culture, Education and Research to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the draft opinion of the Commission for Culture, Education and Research, adopted on 30 November 2006, (CdR 335/2006 rev.1) (rapporteur: **Mr Geert Bourgeois**, Minister in the Flemish Government – BE/EPP);

adopted the following opinion at its 68th plenary session, held on 13-14 February 2007 (meeting of 14 February 2007):

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¹ OJ C 164, 5.7.2005, p. 59.

1. **Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament
Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems**

Planning for Efficiency and Equity

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 1.1 **thanks** the Commission for this contribution to the debate on the reform of education and vocational training systems, and **agrees** with the Commission that responsibility for this reform must remain in the hands of the competent authorities within the Member States;
- 1.2 **agrees** that investments in education and training take time to bear fruit and therefore when deciding on funding priorities, governments should allow for long-term planning at local, regional and national levels. In fact, several proposals set out in the Communication may have budgetary implications at regional and local level;
- 1.3 **acknowledges** the importance of long-term planning but stresses the need to include local and regional authorities in devising and implementing any lifelong learning strategies;
- 1.4 **agrees** with the need for a culture of evaluation within education and training systems but stresses the importance of fostering awareness of the efficient use of resources², **draws** attention to the fact that lifting the financial obstacles to access to early age education are an important but not sufficient policy measure. As pre-primary education in most countries is not part of compulsory education, parents send their children to pre-primary education on a voluntary basis;
- 1.5 **considers** that targeted policy measures should seek not only increased enrolment of children at pre-school age but also incentives and supporting parent-oriented measures to encourage regular attendance in pre-primary education, especially for children from a disadvantaged social background or who live in upland, rural or sparsely populated areas;
- 1.6 **stresses** that effective early childhood education requires well-trained pedagogical staff and therefore calls for increased effort on the level of teacher training;
- 1.7 **encourages** in this respect the promotion of exchanges of best practice and of cross-border networks between localities and regions in improving evaluation and promoting quality assurance;
- 1.8 **notes** that exclusion from the educational system is the first step towards marginalisation followed by exclusion from the employment system and by extension from cultural, social

² CdR 21/2000 fin.

and civic life. In this respect, it **reiterates**³ the importance of combating school dropouts which have negative effects on competitiveness and cohesion⁴;

- 1.9 **welcomes** the focus of the Communication on evidence-based policy planning using solid research results as a reference.

Pre-primary education: Focusing on learning at an early age

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 1.10 **recognises** that research evidence, including from the important work undertaken by the OECD in this field, has shown that in the long run pre-primary education and targeted early intervention programmes bring the highest rates of return over the whole lifelong learning process, especially for the most disadvantaged;
- 1.11 **recalls**, however, the necessity of the cross-sectoral approach in which key responsibilities are held by local and regional authorities and **regrets** the absence of their recognition in the Communication.

Primary and secondary education: Improving the quality of basic education for all

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 1.12 **acknowledges** that EU Member States and competent regions have different education systems with different approaches; however **agrees** that an early differentiation of pupils according to ability at an early age can condition their future career and life paths;
- 1.13 **supports** inclusive lifelong learning opportunities for all recognising the right to go to school and participate in education schemes;
- 1.14 **suggests** that postponing tracking until upper secondary level, combined with the possibility to transfer between school types can be one of the instruments to reduce segregation and promote equity without diminishing efficiency and can also help develop the natural potential and abilities of each pupil;
- 1.15 **has consistently called** for measures for pupils with special needs to be supported, as early on as possible in the system. It **stresses** the importance of arresting marginalisation at primary school level and underlines the value of exchanging experience in this area; it **underlines** the

³ Conclusions of the CoR conference in Helsinki *At the sources of knowledge – Competitiveness through basic education* on 29 September 2006.

⁴ <http://www.cor.europa.eu/en/presentation/educ.asp>.

need for universally challenging learning and for schools that can stimulate all pupils. This applies equally to those with a more difficult background and to the more advanced;

- 1.16 **draws** particular **attention** to the needs of the immigrant population, who often have problems integrating into the education system. This may be due to gaps in the education they received in their countries of origin, or to an insufficient knowledge of the language of the host country. In order to ensure that immigrants receive proper treatment, specific training of teaching staff is also necessary;
- 1.17 **is of the opinion** that the motivation, skills competences and salaries of teachers and trainers, the availability of guidance services and infrastructure factors like appropriate teaching group sizes are important contributory factors in achieving high quality learning outcomes;
- 1.18 **regards** as important the development of a caring learning environment which boosts individual motivation, the effort to learn and confidence to achieve. It also **underlines** the need to ensure the involvement of parents in the education process noting that students with weak home and peer support are at greater risk of social exclusion;
- 1.19 **stresses** that the measures adopted to secure greater equity and improve the way in which the needs of particular groups are met should remain consistent with the effort to improve the efficiency or quality of the education system; these should involve mechanisms to help the learning process to keep the appropriate speed;
- 1.20 **highlights** the need to strike a balance in education systems between basic general training and the possibilities for specialisation. This general knowledge base should always include European culture and history. Moreover, the different education and training systems should devote sufficient attention to key competences for lifelong learning, as defined and adopted in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning.

Higher education: Improving investment while widening participation

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 1.21 **agrees** that modernisation of higher education is a crucial factor in the rapidly evolving knowledge society. Higher education institutions are an essential element of the "knowledge triangle" of education, research and innovation given their interlinked roles;
- 1.22 **points out** therefore that higher education institutions should open themselves up more to new groups of learners, to emphasise lifelong learning and to offer wider access to academic education, as essential conditions for meeting demographic and structural changes over the next few decades;

- 1.23 **recognises**, however, that the growth in student numbers and increasing costs of high-quality education and research need to be matched by increased public and, where appropriate, private funding. Local and regional authorities play a key role in channelling funding towards the modernisation of higher education systems, especially through targeted use of European structural funds;
- 1.24 **recalls** that access to higher education must be as inclusive as possible, not only in order to secure the future of a Europe of knowledge, but also to serve as a basis for the social cohesion of Europe as a whole. **Reaffirms** the broad mission of higher education encompassing its contribution to personal fulfilment and democratic citizenship as well as its role in revitalising cultural heritage⁵;
- 1.25 **notes** that the Communication focuses on the issue of tuition as a means to enhance funding and to stimulate a responsive attitude of students and families towards higher education achievement. Tuition should not become a factor for exclusion on the basis of financial resources. Nevertheless, **it stresses that** tuition is never an isolated issue but, on the contrary, is always embedded in the larger context of a variety of factors related to financial incentives or obstacles to participation in higher education. It therefore **calls** for a broader, context-related approach, taking into account national, regional and local particularities of the funding and tax systems, rather than focussing on the issue of tuition only.

Vocational education and training: Improving quality and relevance

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 1.26 **agrees** with the European Commission that as our population ages, the persistently high level of youth unemployment in the EU is unacceptable, in view of the increased demand for a highly qualified workforce;
- 1.27 **calls** for vocational education and training systems to be recognised and promoted in countries where they are underdeveloped, so that they meet the requirements of the many young people seeking reliable access to the labour market, and the needs of the labour market itself;
- 1.28 **supports** the Commission's proposal for clear and diverse pathways through vocational education and training to further learning and employment and **welcomes** the specific reference to involving the local and regional level in encouraging stakeholder partnerships to enhance the quality and relevance of public training programmes for the unemployed and disadvantaged learners;

⁵ CdR 154/2005 fin.

- 1.29 **points out** that training of teachers and trainers should be updated in order to serve the needs of an increasingly mature learners' public. Specific pedagogical methods and material need to be developed while paying attention to flexible modes of delivery adapted to learners combining their training with professional and family duties. In this context educational and training policies will interfere with social policy issues where local and regional authorities can play a catalyst role;
- 1.30 **stresses** the need for generalised application of structured mechanisms for the validation of prior learning, especially for knowledge and competences acquired outside the formal education system. This validation should serve a double purpose: facilitating employability/social inclusion and providing access to further learning on the basis of prior learning experiences;
- 1.31 **welcomes** in this respect the European Commission's communication on "Adult learning: It is never too late to learn" and agrees that in the light of the demographic change in Europe, more emphasis should be placed on the education of adults, with well-targeted, efficient investments;
- 1.32 **points out**, in this respect, that in many European countries the regional and local level has key responsibilities in the field of adult education and it has a direct interest in the development of workforce skills. It therefore **calls for** the local and regional level to be involved more closely in actions concerning the education of adults at EU level.
2. **Proposal for a Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

- 2.1 **appreciates** the need for a specific European framework for learning qualifications complementing arrangements for professional qualifications, not least because a EQF for lifelong learning will make the transition between the different education and training paths more transparent and visible. Nevertheless, learning qualifications play an important role in the transition from learning environment to working life and can therefore not be disconnected from issues of preparation for the labour market;
- 2.2 **draws the Commission's attention** to the need to carry out a systematic analysis of the impact of its legislative proposals at local and regional level, in particular for fields such as education and vocational training, for which the regional and local authorities are responsible in several Member States. This impact analysis should be published online in full and in all the official languages of the Union;
- 2.3 **welcomes** the Commission's Framework of Qualifications, and supports its double objective of improving transparency of qualifications and promoting mobility in the European Union;

stresses, however, that the EQF in itself does not deliver qualifications but that qualifications frameworks are developed at the national/regional level. Local and regional competent authorities are therefore to be involved in the exercise of linking up national/regional qualifications frameworks to the EQF;

- 2.4 **agrees** with the Commission that national and European qualifications frameworks will facilitate the validation of learning in all contexts. It **welcomes** this inclusive approach as it **recalls** the need for the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal education in lifelong learning and **agrees** that this is of particular importance for promoting equal opportunities by recognising the key competences and skills of the least advantaged⁶;
- 2.5 **considers** the EQF to be a useful tool for increasing mutual trust between national and regional education systems in Europe which will contribute to mobility, competitiveness and employment, encouraging the exchange of knowledge and competences across the EU;
- 2.6 however, **calls** on the Commission to clarify the relationship between qualifications levels, Directive 2000/36/EC and the provisions for the certification of formal and informal learning, which already exist or are currently being established at national and regional level⁷;
- 2.7 notwithstanding the broader perspective of lifelong learning strategies encompassing the objectives of social inclusion and employability as well as personal fulfilment, **welcomes** the output-oriented approach of the Commission to learning outcomes, i.e. the description of qualifications in terms of knowledge and competence;
- 2.8 **considers** that qualifications should be comparable independent of learning context and provider. The learning outcomes approach makes it easier to compare qualifications across different countries and education and training systems, facilitating the role of local and regional educational authorities in the EU;
- 2.9 moreover, learning outcomes and descriptors can function as reference points for quality assurance, thus enhancing European cooperation in quality assurance and mutual recognition of evaluation decisions; **welcomes** therefore the explicit link in the recommendation between the EQF as a transparency tool and the general principles on quality assurance, as these quality assurance principles can play an important role in creating mutual trust as a basis for international recognition of qualifications;
- 2.10 **calls** for the promotion of a framework for cooperation and dissemination of best practice in order to establish a real exchange of experience on a continuous basis. This would enable the positive developments taking place within the Member States in particular at local and

⁶ CdR 31/2006 fin.

⁷ European Parliament resolution on the creation of a European Qualifications Framework (2006/2002 (INI)).

regional level to be capitalised on. It therefore **recommends** the promotion of more Europe-wide networks disseminating best practice in promoting access to training in particular through local and regional partnerships;

2.11 **emphasises** that the EQF should respect the diversity and strengths of regions and localities in the EU. As a reading grid or translation device, the EQF will not replace but complement national and regional qualifications frameworks;

2.12 **believes** that applying the EQF will almost certainly lead to further actions at Community level and **stresses** that, in this case, an in-depth subsidiarity and proportionality analysis must be carried out on these subsequent actions;

2.13 **calls** for clear descriptors to be used and a clear coordination between existing regional qualifications frameworks and the EQF.

2.14 **Recommendations to the Member States**

<i>Text proposed by the Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p>HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT MEMBER STATES (...)</p> <p>2. Relate their national qualification systems to the European Qualifications framework by 2009 ... by developing a national qualification framework, where appropriate according to national legislation and practice.</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>5. Designate a national centre to support and coordinate the relationship between the national qualifications system and the European Qualifications Framework.</p> <p>This centre's tasks should include: (...)</p> <p>(a) ensuring the participation of all relevant national stakeholders including, according to</p>	<p>HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT MEMBER STATES (...)</p> <p>2. Relate their national/<u>regional</u> qualification systems to the European Qualifications framework by <u>2010</u> in particular by referencing in a transparent manner their qualification levels to the levels set out in Annex I, and by developing a national/<u>regional</u> qualification framework, where appropriate according to national/<u>regional</u> legislation and practice.</p> <p>(...)</p> <p>5. Designate a national/<u>regional coordination point</u> to support and <u>in conjunction with other relevant national/regional authorities</u> coordinate the relationship between the <u>national/regional</u> qualifications systems and the European Qualifications Framework.</p> <p>In those Member States where it would be constitutionally impossible to set up a</p>

<p>national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors and experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level;</p>	<p>regional coordination point, the national point should ensure appropriate and sufficient representation of regions with legislative powers.</p> <p>In all events, national/regional coordination points should be built on existing structures wherever possible. If the creation of a new structure cannot be avoided, then the administrative costs should be kept to a minimum.</p> <p>Ultimately, the decision to set up national or regional coordination points should come from the authority responsible in each Member State.</p> <p>This <u>coordination point's</u> tasks should include: (..)</p> <p>(a) ensuring the participation of all relevant national, <u>regional and local</u> stakeholders including, according to national legislation and practice, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, social partners, sectors, experts on the comparison and use of qualifications at the European level, while <u>coordinating with local and regional authorities</u>;</p>
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Rationale

Importance should be given to the local and regional level as in many Member States local and regional authorities are vested with direct responsibilities and powers in the field of education and training, **including the establishment of qualifications frameworks**. They are responsible for the delivery of educational and training services which provide a structure for lifelong learning through the provision of pre-school, school, youth, adult and community services.

If the Commission expects a contact point at Member State level, it can only fulfil the role of coordination point ensuring cooperation at all levels.

Due to the large consultation process when linking up national/regional qualification frameworks to the EQF and the fact that the Recommendation will be adopted no earlier than the end of 2007, beginning of 2008, the deadline of 2010 is more realistic than that of 2009.

2.15 Endorsement of the Commission's intention

<i>Text proposed by the Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p>ENDORSE THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:</p> <p>2. Establish a European Qualifications Framework advisory group (including representatives of the national centres, the European social partners and other stakeholders, as appropriate) in order to monitor, co-ordinate and to ensure the quality and overall coherence of the process of relating qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework;</p> <p>3. Monitor the action taken in response to this Recommendation...</p>	<p>ENDORSE THE COMMISSION'S INTENTION TO:</p> <p>2. Establish a European Qualifications Framework advisory group (including representatives of the national/<u>regional</u> centres, the European social partners and other stakeholders, as appropriate) in order to monitor, co-ordinate and to ensure the quality and overall coherence of the process of relating <u>national/regional</u> qualifications systems to the European Qualifications Framework;</p> <p><u>Assess, in cooperation with the Member States,</u></p>

Rationale

As qualifications frameworks are developed at national/regional level the Commission has to be supported by the Member States in the assessment exercise.

2.16 Definitions

The CoR regrets that there is no mention of regional qualifications frameworks alongside national qualifications frameworks. In contrast to what the Commission proposal's definition seems to suggest it has to be observed that in some Member States regional qualifications frameworks are defined autonomously and can therefore not be seen as mere "sub-frameworks" of the national qualifications framework.

2.17 Annex I: descriptors

The CoR acknowledges that the list of descriptors strikes a delicate balance between the different contexts in which learning qualifications can be acquired.

It draws attention to the necessity of safeguarding the compatibility of the definition of the descriptors for level 5 to 8 with the descriptors from the overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area already approved by the Ministers in charge of higher education in the context of the Bologna process in 2005. In this context it is important to note that the Bologna qualifications framework has defined the levels not only in terms of learning outcomes **but also in terms of ECTS credit ranges**, thus making comparison easier.

The CoR therefore welcomes the Commission's intention to develop a credit transfer system for vocational education and training and, in the long run, considers a credit transfer system valid for the whole range of lifelong learning as a necessary tool to make the implementation of the EQF more efficient.

2.18 **Annex II: common principles for quality assurance**

Although the CoR stresses the triangular relationship between transparency (EQF), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications, it would like to suggest that Annex II is too general to replace existing elaborated systems, principles and standards developed for European cooperation in quality assurance in specific sectors of education and training. Moreover, some of the principles seem to be less appropriate in the context of evaluation of school education. The CoR therefore would like to recall the guiding role of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2001 on *European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education* (OJ L 60, 1.3.2001, p. 51-53), the Recommendation on *further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education* of 15 February 2006 (OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60) and the Council Conclusions on *Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training* of 18 May 2004 (doc. 9599/04).

Brussels, 14 February 2007.

The President
of the
Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General
of the
Committee of the Regions

Michel Delebarre

Gerhard Stahl