Brussels, 24 January 2001

OPINION

of the

Economic and Social Committee

on

***e*Europe 2002 - An information society for all - Draft Action Plan**

COM(2000) 330 final

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On 29 May 2000, the Commission decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on

eEurope 2002 - An Information society for all - Draft Action Plan
COM(2000) 330 final.

The Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 9 January 2001. The rapporteur was **Mr Koryfidis**.

At its 378th plenary session held on 24 and 25 January 2001 (meeting of 24 January) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 80 votes to three, with one abstention.

1.   **Introduction**

1.1   The European Commission launched its "*e*Europe – An Information Society for all[1]" initiative in December 1999[2].

1.2   It was motivated "by the growing realisation that the application of digital technologies has become the key factor for growth and employment", the evidence that "a 'new economy' or e-economy is emerging[3], mainly driven by the Internet[4]", and the fact that "in spite of Europe's lead in certain digital technologies, e.g. mobile communications and digital TV, the uptake of computers and the Internet in Europe remains comparatively low"[5].

1.3   The initiative is aimed "at accelerating the uptake of digital technologies across Europe and ensuring that all Europeans have the necessary skills to use them"[6].

1.4   The broad lines of the eEurope initiative have been well received by the Member States. Most of them, meanwhile, have developed comparable initiatives at national level, e.g.

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[1]   http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/news/index_en.htm

[2]   The progress of the initiative is presented in the appendix (point 1).

[3]   For the term "new economy" and for more general information on the subject, please see:

       http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

[4]   http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_text_en.htm (Introduction)

[5]   See relevant table in the annex to the Commission's progress report; "eEurope: An Information Society For All", electronic address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

[6]   http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/background/index_en.htm

"Germ@ny goes online"[7], the British initiative "Information Age Government"[8], and the French initiative on Internet coregulation[9].

1.5   However, all the evidence suggests that Europe has responded slowly to the major challenge of the Internet. The distribution of users[10], the link between education and the Internet[11], the absence of the new technologies from a large number of businesses, the level of growth in electronic commerce, and other statistics, reflect badly on Europe and confirm the extent of the ground to be made up. It is vital to catch up; but this will clearly be difficult given the pace and speed of developments in this sector. For this reason, in this particular case, Europe can ill afford the luxury of further delay or inertia in the implementation of the action plan.

2.   **The Commission document**

2.1   The action plan in question was drawn up on the basis of the goals of the Lisbon European Council (preparing the transition to a knowledge-based society and economy) and taking into account the reservations expressed by the European Parliament and Member States (danger of exclusion, poverty, skill shortages, etc.).

2.2   The action plan focuses on solutions to the following questions: **what should be done, who should do it and by when.** Its key objectives are:

- **1st objective**: a cheaper, faster and secure Internet
     a) **Cheaper and faster Internet access**
     b) **Faster Internet for researchers and students**
     c) **Secure networks and smart cards**

- **2nd objective**: investing in people and skills
     a) **European youth into the digital age**
     b) **Working in the knowledge-based economy**
     c) **Participation for all in the knowledge-based economy**

- **3rd objective**: stimulating the use of the Internet
     a) **Accelerating e-commerce**
     b) **Government online: electronic access to public services**
     c) **Healthcare online**

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7   Private initiative of Deutsche Telecom in conjunction with the German government. See press release of 11.02.00

8   http://www.iagchampions.gov.uk/Strategy.htm

9   http://www.internet.gouv.fr/francais/textesref/pagsi2/Isi/coregulation.htm

10   See relevant table in the annex to the Commission's progress report, "eEurope: An Information Society For All", electronic
     address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

11   Idem (page 40)

> **d) Digital content for global networks**
> **e) Intelligent transport systems**

2.3   There are three main methods by which the above objectives will be achieved:

- accelerating the establishment of an appropriate legal environment;
- supporting new infrastructure and services across Europe;
- applying the open method of coordination and benchmarking.

2.4   With regard to the timeframe, the key deadline for achieving the action plan targets is 2002, although it is pointed out that it will be very difficult to meet the ambitious objectives set in Lisbon.

2.5   Finally, there are many proposals currently being developed within the framework of the eEurope initiative[12].

3.   General comments

3.1   The ESC welcomes the eEurope initiative and considers it to be the most important and ambitious effort by the European Union to date to familiarise its citizens with and adapt its businesses and its public bodies as rapidly as possible to the new conditions created by the digital age and the new economy. In the Committee's view, this initiative is more than a starting point for that familiarisation and adaptation process, however; it is a buttress for the relevant processes that are already developing, though slowly, in the market and in society.

3.1.1   By introducing the eEurope initiative, the Commission and the Members States have recognised that market forces are not driving the Internet fast enough in Europe. All the products and services are available, but demand is insufficient. The eEurope initiative reinforces and complements the action of market forces in three ways, which in order of priority (the action plan lists them in the reverse order) are:

- promoting Internet use, and growth in demand;
- investing in people and skills;

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[12]   Such as:

- **COM(2000) 323 (01)**: Proposal for a Council Decision adopting a Multiannual Community programme to stimulate the development and use of European digital content on the global networks and to promote linguistic diversity in the Information Society (Opinion: CES 1405/2000)

- **COM(2000) 318 (01)**: COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION e-Learning - Designing tomorrow's education

- **COM(2000) 237 (01)**: COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION Unbundled Access to the Local loop: Enabling the competitive provision of a full range of electronic communication services including broadband multimedia and high-speed Internet (Opinion: CES 959/2000 fin)

Source: http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/greffe_index.html

For more details: http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/reg/en_register_132060.html

- facilitating access to a cheaper and faster Internet, focusing on telecoms charges and security.

3.1.2   The ESC believes that substantial adjustment in Europe to the new conditions will depend in the long run on a combination of the relevant dynamics that the initiative nurtures in the market and society.

3.1.3   In that respect, the ESC agrees that the Commission's action plan will make a positive contribution towards meeting the objectives set by the Lisbon European Council. Under certain conditions, the plan could be a genuine help inter alia in enabling Europe to play a leading role in shaping the new global economic reality of the 21st century.

3.1.3.1   The following observations and proposals are intended to underline the need to clarify certain points in the action plan and to reinforce others. In any event, they express the ESC's general perspective on the eEurope initiative. The Committee's views on the individual objectives of the action plan are set out in corresponding opinions.

3.1.4   The ESC is adamant that all the measures relating to stimulating Internet use, establishing an information society and achieving the Union's new strategic goal[13] should focus on people and their needs, the European citizen, European society and the European economy. Provided it serves that principle, the establishment of the information society - as an antecedent to the knowledge-based society - will acquire real significance.

3.1.5   Inasmuch as the basic aim of the overall initiative is to promote Internet use, the success of the action plan will depend in the long run on:

- if and to what extent it promotes Internet use in business, government and European society as a whole; and
- if and to what extent it generates a dynamic or trend towards increasingly extensive Internet use.

3.2   The ESC is aware of the scale and number of problems associated with the development of the action plan. In particular, the Committee foresees difficulties in covering the ground and gaps that have opened up as a result of Europe's tardy response to the new technological challenges.

3.2.1   Despite the above-mentioned and other problems, the ESC is optimistic that the action plan can be successfully implemented[14]. The key is for there to be political support, and timely awareness among the public and business, and for the appropriate funding to be made available.

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[13]   As is well known, in Lisbon, in March 2000, the Union set itself a new strategic goal for the forthcoming decade "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

[14]   The ESC's optimism is borne out by the latest developments. The press release that accompanied the Commission's communication "The eEurope 2002 Update", prepared for the Nice European Council, notes that the proportion of European households connected to the Internet rose sharply from 18% in March to 28% in October.

3.2.1.1   In practice the above means:

- putting the action plan, and more generally the eEurope initiative, at the top of the political agenda across the board, in all forms and areas of political action;

- bringing every area of public or organised private sector action into line with the initiative, utilising part, however small, of the resources earmarked for this purpose.

3.2.2   For the ESC, the risk of individuals, groups or entire regions being excluded from the overall initiative is great and manifold, given that non-computerised access to universal services will gradually become obsolete as the provision of computer-based services develops. For this reason, the ESC agrees with those who support the view that the programme as a whole and the individual measures should include means of combating these risks. This in part means that:

- support must be given to those regions that by their very nature are in danger of exclusion (mountainous, sparsely populated or island regions);

- special support must be given to people with special needs;

- and finally, support must be given to individuals who are untouched by modern technology or who for specific reasons, or plain economics, have no access to it.

3.2.2.1   The applicant countries are at risk too, with regard to the competitiveness of their economies and social cohesion. For this reason, provision should also be made for them throughout the action plan development process.

3.2.2.2   Against this backdrop, the Committee considers access for European citizens to the information society and participation in the knowledge-based society to be paramount as a social goal, and as a social and individual right. This right must be taken into consideration in the eventual debate on the "Charter of Fundamental Rights"[15], and in its formulation.

3.2.2.3   The reference to the risk of exclusion points to a clear aim: that once the programme is complete, not a single European citizen, regardless of the level of schooling reached, or company of any size, should be able to deny having had the opportunity or the possibility to acquaint themselves with the information society.

3.2.2.4   In any event, the greatest risk is that Europe will be permanently lagging behind its competitors with regard to the information and knowledge-based society. For this reason, the ESC would place particular emphasis on the need for the European productive sector to enter the information society immediately. Otherwise, European business will not be able to compete in the new world

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15   See ESC opinion on the subject, "Services of general interest", OJ C 368 of 20 December 1999

economic environment, with all that implies for the development of individual policies to combat exclusion.

3.3   **Organisational problems**

3.3.1   In the ESC's view, in the final analysis, the implementation of the action plan will be judged largely in terms of organisation. It is precisely on this level that the ESC agrees broadly with the Commission's approach. It agrees in principle with the objectives as they are set out, the means of tying them in with the demands of the special European Council in Lisbon, the definition of the measures and of the operators with responsibility for carrying them out, and the deadlines set. As a complement to the organisational approach taken by the Commission, the ESC would make the following observations and proposals:

3.3.2   **Organisational problems - observations:**

1st observation: In the ESC's view, the approach proposed by the Lisbon European Council for the coordination and implementation of the initiative is important. An "open method of coordination based on (...) benchmarking" could indeed, under certain conditions, provide a major boost towards achieving the objectives of the action plan. The approach, however, fails to define the term "benchmarking". Furthermore, it fails to specify which body or bodies will coordinate the overall initiative[16].

2nd observation: There has been no mention yet of how the overall programme will be publicised and promoted in the community and in the business world so that the public will be informed fully and rapidly.

3rd observation: Lastly, there is no financial/technical estimate of the overall cost of the programme nor any mention of how the cost will be divided among the various levels.

3.3.3   **Organisational problems - proposals**

1st proposal: In principle, the ESC is in favour of being able to solve any organisational problems at national level. Despite this view, however, it believes that the most appropriate bodies to coordinate the overall initiative at local level may possibly be the multi-purpose learning centres referred to in the Lisbon European Council conclusions[17]. More specifically on the subject of benchmarking, the ESC would draw the Commission's attention to the need to ensure that the system as a whole is credible. First and foremost this means transparency and ongoing central political control over the operating procedures of the entire system (European Parliament/Council). In addition, however, it means taking any measures that will ensure the comparative data are reliable and truly comparable.

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[16]   It should be noted that relevant committees have been set up in the meantime. Despite this positive development, the ESC notes the need to speed up the processes for dealing effectively with the serious issue of coordinating the implementation of the action plan.

[17]   For further analysis of this proposal see the appendix, point 2

2nd proposal: Informing citizens about the eEurope programme and the related action plan in a comprehensive, credible and understandable way is an important factor in the success of the programme as a whole. At local level, the coordination of public information could be the task of the multi-purpose learning centres. In any event the ESC feels that there should be a continuous flow of information, in all directions and using all available means. The social partners and, more generally, organised civil society have a special role to play in meeting this requirement.

3rd proposal: The ESC recommends a detailed study on the subject and a specific budget. People should be aware of this study and budget, just as they should be aware of what exactly is at stake now and in the future.

3.4   **Individual issues of importance**

3.4.1   The second area of action, on which the success of the Lisbon objectives will be judged, relates to the means of tackling individual issues, that can nevertheless be considered important.

3.4.2   **Individual issues of importance - observations**

1st observation: The ESC would point out that in general, every country being different, only a small portion of the European public are participants in the information society - though of course the number is growing constantly. For want of specialised knowledge, many of them, both inside and outside the productive sector are bewildered by the developments. Many others, generally on the threshold of the working world, are participants in an information society environment that is shaped entirely by the market and its rules.

2nd observation: In the view of the ESC, the market's contribution to the development of the information society is important and positive. So far, it has helped to ensure that many European businesses, workers and citizens are familiar with it and are part of it. However, the overall effort must no longer be left exclusively to the market and its rules. This option would marginalise large sections of the population (the unemployed, the elderly, people with special needs, regions where the market does not function fully), while also inevitably leading to serious divisions and social conflict. For this reason, the ESC supports and underlines the position of the Lisbon summit, with regard to "giving higher priority to lifelong learning as a basic component of the European social model"[18].

3rd observation: The issue for the ESC centres on how to move forward to increase familiarity with the information society and the potential prospects that progress will open up. In this context, there are two main areas of action, which must operate simultaneously and in parallel with immediate effect.

- The first of these, which is concerned with school education and the requirements the information society imposes on it, clearly serves medium- and long-term goals. An important one of these goals is

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[18]   For further analysis of the means of acquainting the masses with information society technologies see CES 244/2000 (Point 5), OJ C 117 of 26 April 2000

that of meeting the need for experts (in terms of both quantity and quality). The European market must acquire and hold on to its own top quality experts in the information society.

- The other concerns Europeans who are outside the educational sphere, and their economic and social activities, of whatever kind. Action in this field caters to the need to familiarise Europe's citizens with modern technology and the information society without delay, whether or not they are in active employment[19].

3.4.3 **Individual issues of importance - proposals**

1st proposal: The ESC recommends conducting studies into the response of the adult population to attempts to familiarise it with the information society. These studies should first be addressed to the leading political, social and economic players. Such studies merit special attention, as for the first time in world history, children and teenagers are better placed in terms of "knowledge" (of communications technologies) than a large section of people of working age (especially those currently in charge of production processes).

2nd proposal: The effectiveness of the action plan will to a large extent depend on the level of its initial audience and the incentives that are provided to elicit an overall positive reception from it. Without ruling out support for any type of relevant initiative, the ESC feels that the best possible dynamic for the development of the action plan and reaching its objectives may be achieved through the existing organisational structure of European society, coupled with appropriate incentives to suit each situation. In general terms, the ESC suggests that the plan should be developed through:

- SMEs,
- education, and
- civil society organisations.

          The incentives could for instance target:

- SMEs, by enhancing their electronic presence (web pages, inter-company communication, electronic communication with government, market research);

- educational establishments, by providing them with the relevant infrastructure, in schools, youth clubs, libraries, etc. (Such infrastructure in schools or colleges acting as local learning centres could also be made available to adults outside school hours.) One possibility that would definitely yield positive results would be to supply educators at all levels with free computer equipment (PCs with free access to the Internet);[20]

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[19]   See ESC proposal on the subject (CES 244/2000 Points 5 and 8 - OJ C 117 of 26 April 2000)

[20]   In Sweden, "money has been allocated by the government to supply 60,000 teachers with a personal computer." Source: European Report on Quality of School Education - Sixteen Quality Indicators - May 2000 (Annex 1 - ICT - last point) http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/indic/backen.html

- civil society organisations, by providing them with whatever support is needed to install and update their electronic equipment.

3rd proposal: The ESC believes that a special effort is required of civil society organisations and SMEs as implementation of the action plan gets underway. In this respect, the ESC is prepared to provide the Commission with its assistance, through the organisations it represents.

4th proposal: A very strong incentive for ordinary Europeans to become familiar with the information society would certainly be the potential to broaden the exercise of democracy and the preconditions for more direct participation in the decision-making that affects them. The ESC suggests that research should be conducted into the impact of the information society on European democracy, economy and society. E-government could play an important role, for instance within public administration, between administration and business and between administration and the public (licences, taxes, social security, etc.)[21]. More direct forms of communication, government and participation in decision-making centres, greater transparency and information on tap as required, are factors that could help build a more democratic Europe, in political, social and economic terms.

4.   Specific comments

4.1   Objective 1: Cheaper, faster and secure Internet access

4.1.1   The ESC agrees with the broad lines of the Commission's approach. It would however like to make the following comments and proposals.

4.1.1.1   Cheaper, faster and secure Internet access - observations

1st observation: A liberalised and healthy framework of competition in the area of telecommunications services[22] will certainly help to reduce the cost and increase the speed of Internet access. The ESC welcomes the Commission's proposals for directives to this effect[23]. However, it should be pointed out that such a framework of competition does not yet exist to the same degree in all the Member States. The cost of Internet access[24] is high (compared with the US and Canada), and varies enormously from country to country within the EU. Meanwhile, the need for Europe to recover lost ground in Internet development is ever more pressing.

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21   See ESC opinions: "Green Paper on public sector information in the information society", OJ C 169 of 16 June 1999, and "Digital content/global networks" (CES 1405/2000)

22   For more information see appendix, point 3

23   See COM(2000) 384, 385, 386 and 393 final (ESC opinions CES 47/2001, CES 48/2001, CES 49/2001 and CES 50/2001) and the ESC opinion "Unbundled access to the local loop", OJ C 14 of 16 January 2001

24   See the relevant table in the annex to the Commission's progress report "eEurope: An Information Society For All", electronic address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

2nd observation: The ESC believes that Europe has a right and duty to develop its own pan-European high-quality, high-speed network for research, education and development. It therefore agrees with the Commission's proposal on this subject.

3rd observation: The issue of Internet security is complex and obviously difficult to solve. It is as much to do with the crimes, financial or otherwise, that may be committed, as with the protection of the rights of individuals - children for instance - from any violation of a public or private nature. The ESC feels that this problem must not be allowed to have a detrimental effect on:

- the development of the Internet;
- economic growth;
- the free movement of ideas, information, knowledge or products; or
- individual or social rights.

4.1.1.2 **Cheaper, faster and secure Internet access - proposals**

1st proposal: The ESC considers that the delay in securing a healthy competitive framework for telecommunications is a critical factor in Europe's race to make up lost ground in Internet participation. To make good this delay, the ESC suggests providing encouragement and support [25] for Internet access for groups of the population who can and must familiarise themselves with it quickly. These groups obviously include:

- those involved in education (pupils, students, teachers);
- businesses;
- civil society organisations;
- specific groups such as the unemployed and people with literacy problems.

In view of universal service requirements, the ESC also believes that it is necessary to look into fast and cheap Internet access, in particular for schools, universities, libraries and decentralised health services[26], in line with the American model[27].

2nd proposal: As a high-speed trans-European network would have a direct impact on the production process, it would broaden the conditions for sustainable development in Europe. In this context, European businesses must not be excluded from participating in or accessing such a network. Whatever happens, it must be a high-quality, European network with specific content, and named participants, clearly subject to democratic control.

3rd proposal: The ESC recognises that Internet crime is not just a European problem and that it cannot be fought at European level alone. It is therefore in favour, in principle, of an international

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[25] This involves the supply of personal computers as well as connection to the Internet.

[26] See Commission proposal on the universal service in the telecommunications sector, on which the ESC issued an opinion.

[27] US Telecom Act 1996

body to prevent potential Internet offences (prevention), and believes that the state has a responsibility to protect the public from this form of crime (enforcement). The ESC would however stress that these functions must not be allowed to hamper Internet developments, nor must they be economically stifling or lead to any unnecessary restriction on individual or social rights.

4.2 Objective 2: Investing in people and skills

4.2.1 The ESC notes that the second objective will be the single most difficult part of the overall initiative to implement. With regard to the specific points included under this objective, the ESC would make the following observations:

4.2.1.1 Investing in people and skills - observations

1st observation: Objective 2 features:

- ambitious individual objectives;
- many levels of action with differing requirements (children, adults, specific sections of the population, national level);
- tight implementation deadlines;
- a large number and variety of players to be involved in its implementation.

Despite the above outline of Objective 2, the ESC does not disagree with the framework, substance or content of the proposals. It believes that the central and primary goal of this action plan is to raise awareness (among governments in particular) of the need to implement it, and this will require a major shake-up.

2nd observation: In the opinion of the ESC, the achievement of Europe's current strategic objective will in future depend largely on the relationship that is created between education and the modern technologies, between education, the information society and the knowledge-based society. The Committee has made and will be making more specific comments on this subject in related opinions[28]. It is however worth noting the enormous extent of the changes required in the learning process and the responsibility of the academic world to influence and to help shape the new educational order. It should also be noted that:

- national educational systems - in general - have proved unready to meet the demands of the information and knowledge based society;

- the modernisation process required is radically changing the traditional picture of schools. In essence this implies a new type of school set-up with[29]:

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[28] See relevant ESC opinions: CES 1194/2000, CES 476/2000 (OJ C 168 of 16 June 2000), and CES 244/2000 (OJ C 117 of 26 April 2000), and the opinion underway on "The European dimension of education" (CES 788/2000)

[29] For further analysis see CES 1113/1999 (report on the European dimension of education) and CES 788/2000 (opinion in progress on the same subject)

- *broader objectives (meeting the demands of the information and knowledge-based society, the new European order and economic globalisation);*
- *a different structure (responding to the new circumstances generated by the concept of life-long learning);*
- *a broader scope for learning (responding to the need to extend the age range of compulsory education, also responding to the establishment of life-long learning);*
- *modern study means, methodologies and content (adaptation and utilisation of the new technologies, especially information technology, throughout the educational process and practice).*

3rd observation: The ESC agrees with the Commission's view that "digital literacy is an essential element of the adaptability of the workforce and the employability of all citizens"[30]. Objectively, however, the ease with which individuals can become digitally literate is generally inversely proportionate to their age. In practice, this means that the effort required to adjust depends on how old a person is[31]. Clearly, ensuring the adaptability of the workforce, and the employability of older people in particular, calls for:

- a re-examination and adjustment of training systems;
- teaching to cover digital literacy;
- incentives for individuals to become fully acquainted with the information and knowledge-based society (having work-related knowledge, making full use of the Internet, and turning the opportunities offered by the knowledge-based economy to account).

4th observation: In the digital age, workers, their qualifications and their competitiveness are key factors in the development and quality of production. It follows that in the long run, these factors will determine the location of new industries, work organisation and working life in general.

4.2.1.2 **Investing in people and skills - proposals**

1st proposal: The ESC feels the time is ripe for the Union to take relevant strategic initiatives with relation to education. What is needed is a well-prepared and meaningful dialogue of the kind that has in any case already begun with the decisions taken in Lisbon. This dialogue on education and its European dimension must not be confined to the Council and the education ministers, but must extend to society and the productive sector, and involve turning current good practice to account. Only then will it be convincing and effective. The ESC is ready to take part in such a dialogue.

2nd proposal: The ESC is especially interested in the institution of life-long learning, which will be responsible for acquainting Europeans - irrespective of their age - with the thinking and mechanisms of the information society. It must also pass on knowledge and understanding of the new

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30   eEurope: Objective 2, point b

31   See the ESC's analytical proposal for mass familiarisation of the general public with the information society, CES 244/2000 (OJ C 117 of 26 April 2000)

order created by the prospect of European integration, globalisation and the new technologies. Lastly, in terms of work and production, it will be responsible for acquainting the public and businesses with the requirements of the modern age and the new economy. For this reason, the institution of life-long learning should be established as soon as possible, with the active participation of organised civil society[32]. In this area too, the ESC is prepared to cooperate, not least by presenting its views.

3rd proposal: The ESC suggests that, from now on, relevant decisions should take serious account of the repercussions that the development of the eEurope programme will have on workers. These repercussions must be addressed in social terms and within the framework of the European social model. After all, workers are part-owners of the project, as they have made an important contribution to the transition from the industrial to the digital age and the added value this has generated.

4.3 Objective 3: Stimulate the use of the Internet

4.3.1 The value of the Internet as a mechanism and domain for consolidating and developing the information and knowledge-based society and the "new economy" depends on its visitors/users: the more Internet users there are, the greater its value. The stimulation of Internet use is, therefore, a precondition for the development of electronic commerce and all that it implies in terms of reducing production costs[33] and boosting productivity and growth. It will also prompt the creation of new businesses[34] and thus new jobs. Lastly, the stimulation of Internet use is a precondition for the development of integrated communications programmes, and easy and quick access to all kinds of information and knowledge, at virtually no charge. Developing an Internet, whose users will ideally include the entire European public, should make it easier to solve problems such as communication between administrations and the public and vice versa, the provision of health and education services, transport and travel.

4.3.1.1 Stimulate the use of the Internet - observations

1st observation: The ESC would stress that the development of electronic commerce[35] is essentially a matter for the market and consumers. The EU institutions and Member State governments must solve any statutory or legislative problems that arise as quickly and uniformly as possible. In addition, they must formulate a European position in the dialogue emerging at world level. Lastly, following on from points already made, they must stimulate Internet use, in part by taking specific measures to encourage consumer confidence in the Internet.

2nd observation: A united European front with regard to the statutory and legislative problems raised by the development of the Internet and its use in everyday transactions will be critical for

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[32] For further analysis see the relevant Commission memorandum SEC(2000) 1832

[33] See the relevant table in the annex to the Commission's progress report "eEurope: An Information Society For All", electronic address: http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

[34] Idem

[35] See ESC opinion (INT/018) "Legal aspects of electronic commerce in the internal market" CES 457/1999 (OJ C 169 of 16 June 1999)

Europe's prestige and competitive edge. It is also necessary if Europe is to play a serious part in the current global debate on the subject. There are battles to be won over the establishment and recognition of the ".eu" domain name, European digital content and the promotion of multilingualism on the Internet[36], digital television, and mobile telephony[37] and its connection with the Internet, smart cards, etc.

3rd observation: The ESC believes that governments must lose no time in becoming part of the digital environment. In part, this means the immediate education of employees in the above working environment. Meanwhile, the faster public authorities take on the electronic mind set, the faster the system will develop within society.

4th observation: The use of the Internet in under-privileged regions, and in particular the Objective 1 regions of the Structural Funds, may prove to be an important development tool, meeting outstanding needs (e.g. teleworking, on-line health care, etc.).

4.3.1.2 **Stimulate the use of the Internet - proposals**

1st proposal: The ESC would like to see, within a set timescale, a comparative evaluation of Europe's position regarding the third objective and, more specifically, electronic commerce and digital content. The report should also include an update on the latest technological developments in the area.

2nd proposal: The ESC senses the need for immediate application of the Lisbon European Council's proposal for benchmarking. This would naturally put considerable pressure on the governments of the Member States to respond to the specific action plan and move into the digital age. The initiative must also be given constant and unswerving support by all the EU bodies.

3rd proposal: The ESC believes that the Structural Fund Objective 1 regions lend themselves to the application of relevant pioneering programmes, that could be financed by the European Investment Bank, Member States, the Community and the private sector.

4th proposal: The ESC is especially in favour of developing intelligent transport services. It therefore calls upon the national governments, the Commission and the private sector to use the new technologies to increase the safety of land, sea and air transport.

5. **Recommendations**

5.1 The ESC, working from a positive standpoint regarding the eEurope action plan and on the basis of:

• the views of the organisations it represents, and

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[36]   See ESC opinion "Digital content/global networks" CES 1405/2000

[37]   See relevant table in the annex to the Commission progress report "eEurope: An Information Society for All", electronic address:
       http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/documentation/progrep/pr_annex2_en.htm

- its consideration of the subject to date, would make the following recommendations to the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission:

5.1.1 The Committee believes that, so far, the eEurope initiative has been promoted successfully and positively. The major players at economic and social level have to a large degree grasped its aims and importance. This however was the easiest part of the venture. The most difficult phase is that of weaving the initiative into the economic and social fabric. For this phase, the ESC recommends:

- further increasing political backing;
- concentrating efforts and maintaining a high profile for the initiative;
- highlighting good practice and relevant individual achievements.

5.1.2 The ESC believes that promoting Internet use is the most fundamental aim of the action plan. It feels that this will give a real boost to the European market, while also increasing the familiarity of the European public with the information society, in European terms (without exclusion, through education). It also believes that Internet use will bear fruit in the long term. The benefits will be reaped by the market and consumers, administrations and citizens, majorities, specific groups and minorities. Moreover, in the ESC's view, if Internet use is to grow, a majority social trend must be created. To speed up the promotion of Internet usage the ESC recommends:

- immediate connection to the Internet for public bodies; electronic links between administrations and the public and administrations and business;
- immediate support for Internet access for population groups, such as:
  - ✓ people involved in education (pupils, students, teachers);
  - ✓ businesses;
  - ✓ civil society organisations; and
  - ✓ specific groups, such as the unemployed and people with literacy problems.

5.1.3 In the ESC's view, there is a real and significant risk of individuals or groups of individuals being excluded from the information society and its benefits. To avoid this danger, the ESC recommends including the above dimension in all the various measures. More specifically, it recommends:

- strengthening regions that are by their very nature at risk of exclusion (mountainous, sparsely populated and island regions);

- giving more specific support to people with special needs (finding ways and means of raising their awareness);

- giving support to people who are untouched by modern technology or who, for specific reasons or plain economics, have no contact with it.

5.1.4   The applicant countries are also at risk in terms of the competitiveness of their economies and social cohesion. For this reason, the ESC recommends they be included in the development of the action plan.

5.1.5   The ESC points out the importance of ensuring that Europeans now and in future are familiar with the information society. It would also note that all the measures to promote Internet use, establishing the information society and achieving the new strategic objective of the Union must centre on people and their needs, the European citizen and European society. Only by serving that principle will the establishment of the information society - in advance of the knowledge-based society - become meaningful. The ESC therefore recommends that the familiarisation process be considered paramount as a social goal, and as a social and individual right. This right should be taken into account in the final version of the "charter of social rights".

5.1.6   The ESC believes that the proposed "open method of coordination", based on benchmarking, will work well and should act as a driving force for the implementation of the action plan. Special care should however be taken to ensure that data are reliable and comparable. Ongoing political control will be required to ensure that the system works effectively. The bodies that coordinate the implementation of the action plan at local level can play an important part in terms of ensuring the reliability and effectiveness of the system as a whole. The ESC recommends examining the possibility of entrusting this role to the local learning centres foreseen by the Lisbon European Council, or similar bodies, that are already operating in some Member States. It goes without saying that these bodies should be independent from administrations.

5.1.7   Meanwhile, in any event, the ESC would stress the need at the same time to draw on the Structural Funds and relevant research programmes, in addition to related Community cooperation measures, especially those concerning the applicant and Mediterranean partner countries[38].

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[38]   ERDF, ESF, Cohesion Fund, Pre-Accession Fund, fifth RTD framework programme, Phare, MEDA, INFO 2000, MEDIA, etc.

5.1.8   The ESC notes that the promotion of the action plan in local society and the local economy will be fraught with problems, some serious. Differences between countries, generations, various social groups (employed and unemployed), and individuals will make the overall initiative difficult. Research is needed immediately to address individual problems that may appear at this level[39]. The Committee also recommends supplying all parties with a constant flow of information, especially regarding the best practice for dealing with this type of problem. Finally, it recommends making the best possible use of any existing expertise at European and national level with a view to developing a preventive policy in this area.

5.1.9   The ESC is of the opinion that nearly all the action plan objectives and, more generally, Europe's current strategic goal will depend largely on the relationship that is created between education and the modern technologies, between education, the information society and the knowledge-based society. For this reason, the ESC would place special emphasis on the options taken regarding:

- modern forms of learning (e-learning and its implications for university and pre-university education in particular);
- new educational institutions (life-long learning, local multi-purpose learning centres);
- the European dimension of education.

        The ESC, believing the time to be right, recommends that the Union act strategically and take the necessary measures in education. Such measures should be identified through an ongoing, meaningful and open dialogue between the Member States, the European institutions and European society as a whole.

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[39]   Such as, for instance, the university research programme in Oxford, UK, Germany and Italy, co-funded by the DG for Employment and Social Affairs

5.1.10 The ESC believes that the social partners and, more generally, civil society organisations have their own important role to play in promoting the overall initiative, implementing the action plan and achieving the current European strategic objective. For this reason, it recommends close cooperation between the European institutions and civil society organisations. To this end, the ESC is prepared to contribute in whichever way it can.

Brussels, 24 January 2001

The President
of the
Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
Economic and Social Committee

Göke Frerichs

Patrick Venturini

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N.B.: Appendix overleaf.

APPENDIX

Point 1:

The progress to date of the eEurope initiative:

- **11.12.1999:** The HELSINKI European Council "welcomes the eEurope initiative launched by the Commission as a way of turning Europe into a genuine information society for all. The European Council invites the Commission, together with the Council, to prepare the eEurope Action Plan, to provide a progress report to the Lisbon Special European Council on 23/24 March 2000 and to conclude the Action Plan by June 2000". (http://ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/ (Helsinki: European Council, 10-11 December 1999, point 45))

- **8.3.2000:** The Commission adopts its progress report on the eEurope initiative, a top priority for the Lisbon European Council. (23-24 March 2000). (http://europa.eu.int/comm/ information_society/eeurope/news/index_en.htm)

- **15.3.2000:** The European Parliament adopts a resolution welcoming the Portuguese presidency's intentions for the special Lisbon Council meeting. It considers that only a strong, innovative and knowledge-based economy can effectively tackle poverty, social exclusion and unemployment.
  (http://www.europarl.eu.int/dg3/sdp/tribeur/en/en0003t4.pdf &
  http://www.europarl.eu.int/dg3/sdp/backg/en/b000322.htm#1)

- **23-24.3.2000:** The European Council meeting in Lisbon (special meeting) sets the Union a new strategic goal for the next decade: "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (http://ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/index.htm (point 5)). As part of the overall strategy for attaining that goal, the European Council invites the Council and the Commission to "draw up a comprehensive eEurope Action Plan to be presented to the European Council in June this year, using an open method of coordination based on the benchmarking of national initiatives, combined with the Commission's recent eEurope initiative as well as its communication 'Strategies for jobs in the Information Society'". (http://ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/index.htm (point 8))

- **24.5.2000:** The European Commission presents its contribution to the eEurope Action Plan, due to be agreed upon by the EU leaders at Feira summit on 19 and 20 June.

- **8.6.2000:** The Education Council responds favourably to the Commission communication of 24 May 2000 on "e-learning – designing tomorrow's education" (COM(2000) 318 final (http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/elearning/doc_en.html). The initiative includes certain key elements of the Lisbon European Council conclusions in the area of developing the learning society. Its purpose is to implement the "eEurope" initiative in the areas of education and training.

- **19-20.6.2000:** The European Council meeting at Santa Maria da Feira endorses "the comprehensive eEurope 2002 Action Plan and requests the institutions, the Member States and all other actors to ensure its full and timely implementation by 2002 and to prepare longer term perspectives for a knowledge-based economy encouraging info-inclusion and closing the numeracy gap". (http://ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/index.htm) (European Council meeting at Santa Maria da Feira 19-20 June 2000 - point 22)

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Point 2:

The multi-purpose learning centres can bridge the large gap separating education from society and production.

These centres (based in principle on existing selected schools at municipal or district level) could begin working almost immediately, with selected staff and few adjustment costs, as coordination centres for programme implementation.

Each local multi-purpose learning centre could offer life-long learning while also providing the required training in the area of modern technologies, and the information and knowledge-based society.

Point 3:

The new regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services makes the following proposals:

- Directive on a common regulatory framework for electronic communications networks and services (COM(2000) 393) - sets out the horizontal provisions of the new electronic communications regulatory framework of the European Union
- Directive on the authorisation of electronic communications networks and services (COM(2000).....) - aims at a single European market for electronic communications services by harmonising the rules for authorising provision of such services
- Directive on access to, and interconnection of, electronic communications networks and associated facilities (COM(2000).....) - establishes a framework for access and interconnection agreements across the EU.
- Directive on universal service and users' rights relating to electronic communications networks and services (COM(2000).....) - sets out the rights that users have in respect of electronic communications services, in particular in respect of universal service
- Directive on the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector (COM(2000).....) - updates the current Directive to ensure it is technologically neutral and can cover new communications services
- Regulation on unbundled access to the local loop (COM(2000) 394 final) - introduces a requirement for local loop unbundling, designed to enter into force by 31 December 2000, in advance of the entry into force of the rest of the package
- Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision on a regulatory framework for radio spectrum policy in the Community, (COM(2000) 407 final) - establishes a policy and legal framework in the Community in order to achieve the harmonisation of the use of the radio spectrum

Source: Explanatory Memorandum (first page) of COM(2000) 393.