

COM-7/029

Brussels, 26 June 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 14 June 2001

on the

Memorandum on Lifelong Learning

SEC(2000) 1832

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO The Commission Staff working paper: A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (SEC(2000) 1832;

HAVING REGARD TO The European Commission's decision of 9 January 2001 under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community to consult the Committee of the Regions on the subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its Bureau on 13 June 2000 to draw up an Opinion on this matter and to instruct Commission 7 - Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport and Citizens' Rights to undertake the preparatory work;

HAVING REGARD TO the Draft Opinion (CdR 19/2001 rev.2) adopted by Commission 7 on 23 April 2001 (rapporteur: **Mrs Christina Tallberg**, S/PSE);

HAVING REGARD TO the conclusions of the Presidency of the Lisbon European Council of 23-24 March 2000, the Feira European Council of 19-20 June 2000 and the Stockholm European Council of 23-24 March 2001;

HAVING REGARD TO The Commission's 1995 White Paper on Education and Training - Teaching and Learning - Towards the Learning Society (COM(95) 590 final) and the Communication from the Commission - Towards a Europe of Knowledge (COM(1997) 563 final);

HAVING REGARD TO The Communication from the Commission - *eLearning - Designing Tomorrow's Education* (COM(2000) 318 final) and the Report from the Commission on Access to continuous training in the Union (COM(97) 180 final);

HAVING REGARD TO The Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 16 November 1994 on establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning (CdR 244/1994 fin¹; COM (94) 264 final) and The Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 15 July 1998 on the Report from the Commission on Access to continuous training in the Union (CdR 424/1997 fin²; COM (97) 180 final);

HAVING REGARD TO The Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 14 December 2000 on *eLearning - Designing tomorrow's education* (CdR 314/2000 fin; COM(2000) 318 final).

Adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 39th plenary session on 13-14 June 2001 (meeting of 14 June).

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

1. The CoR welcomes the Commission's Memorandum as a very important starting point for mobilising all stakeholders with a view to stepping up the development of various possible education areas. The aim is also to encourage active citizenship and meet the needs of the new knowledge-based economy.
2. The CoR believes that a very important feature of the Memorandum is that, in addition to lifelong learning, it also highlights the lifewide dimension of learning by pointing out the considerable learning opportunities which exist outside formal education systems.
3. The CoR agrees with the Commission's view that the time has come to translate thoughts on lifelong learning into action, and to frame strategies at EU, national, regional and local level. This must, of course, be based on the subsidiarity principle.
4. The Commission's proposal to launch a lifelong learning debate as close as possible to the citizen is a new, interesting departure which the CoR is familiar with, and endorses.
5. The CoR supports the Commission's view that lifelong learning must be available to all, including people of all ages, with different backgrounds and circumstances. The regional and local level impacts on people's everyday lives from childhood through adulthood and into old age.
6. The CoR believes there is great potential in the learning environment which can be tapped by systematically mobilising the various potential players at local and regional level.
7. The CoR welcomes the Commission's intention to use the Memorandum to:
 - initiate consultation focusing on citizens and their learning needs with the competent players at all levels;

- launch a debate on a comprehensive strategy for the implementation of lifelong learning for individuals in all areas of public and private life;
- involve the key players in lifelong learning at all levels, including the EU institutions and the social partners, and based on the outcome of this wide consultation, propose objectives, initiatives and goals for the implementation of a lifelong learning strategy.
 8. The CoR endorses this procedure, since a debate about lifelong learning must clearly involve citizens themselves and the various potential players in the learning arena.
 9. It is important that the CoR should be involved in promoting this debate. The CoR represents the local and regional political levels which are responsible for ensuring that the local community can earn a living, thrive and take an active part in society - and not least in the democratic process.
 10. The local and regional levels also have a duty to act as:
 - education authorities/executives, since many local and regional authorities have to provide general education and vocational training;
 - social authorities, with responsibility for citizens' welfare, including children, adults and seniors and for the inclusion and social integration of the most disadvantaged, particularly those with physical or mental disabilities;
 - coordinators for local and regional development and growth, and consequently it is also in their interest to develop a skilled workforce;
 - employers, and as such it is in their own direct interest to boost their employees' skills;
 - local and regional partners for social economy players, in order to boost public participation in the democratic process.

Lifelong and lifewide learning

11. The CoR fully endorses the view that lifelong learning must be available to everyone regardless of age, background or circumstances. The CoR also sees lifelong learning as indispensable to the survival and development potential of every region and community, and to putting the European Union at the forefront of the knowledge-based economy.
12. Furthermore, the CoR believes it is extremely important that the Memorandum also

mentions *lifewide, lifelong learning*, highlighting the considerable learning opportunities which exist outside formal school education in particular, *viz.*:

- non-formal learning in associative life, through voluntary courses, adult education centres, study associations, open universities, etc.;
 - informal learning at work and in everyday life. The CoR considers that the scope and importance of informal learning needs to be discussed in greater detail.
13. The CoR believes that this broader interpretation of lifelong learning marks a new departure, with "learning" no longer being equated with formal education systems, or restricted to the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge. Instead, greater emphasis will be placed on the individual's learning and development potential.
 14. The CoR also believes that this approach will alter the role of the formal education system. The CoR believes it is important to discuss how schools could concentrate more on increasing awareness of different forms of learning, and on shaping the public's attitude towards learning in various contexts outside school and throughout the different stages of life.
 15. As a platform for lifelong and lifewide learning, the most important task of primary and middle schools is perhaps to provide the cultural and methodological foundations in order to continually stimulate curiosity and the desire to learn.

The Memorandum contains six different points (Key Messages) which form the framework for future debate.

(1) New basic skills for all

16. The CoR welcomes the discussion on basic skills for all and agrees with the Commission's view that it would be best for the discussion to start by looking into broadly defined areas of knowledge rather than traditional school subjects. The CoR wishes to take part in the discussion.
17. Skills such as the three Rs are still very important. But they can also be seen as a means of acquiring knowledge, communication and problem solving skills. ICT and foreign language ability can also be considered as bolstering these skills. Other skills mentioned in the Memorandum are "self-direction", "learning how to learn" and "entrepreneurial skills".
18. Understanding, respect and empathy for fellow human beings - regardless of ethnic origin, language or religion - are examples of that regard for all others which the different types of learning should advocate. Another is grasping that European diversity in terms of language, culture and natural conditions provides value added which can enrich and strengthen European identity.
19. Similarly, an insight into local and regional diversity can create a more dynamic, empowered knowledge society.

20. Equal opportunities and environmental issues should also be highlighted.

(2) More investment in human resources

21. Like the Commission, the CoR believes it is essential to discuss increased investment in human resources, and that a key issue is how to maximise the effectiveness of such investment. Local and regional authorities can provide a valuable bridge between companies/working life on the one hand, and local education and training organisers. Local and regional authorities are uniquely placed to introduce constructive partnerships with both the social partners and education and training establishments, and hence to tailor education opportunities to specific local needs and requirements.
22. The CoR would stress, however, that these systems must not be designed in such a way as to open gaps between the unemployed or those excluded from the workforce and those in work, or between those who have high and lower levels of education.
23. Consequently, funding for lifelong learning cannot just be a matter for agreement between the social partners. It should be adapted to reflect the new view of learning and development expressed in the Commission's report.
24. Moreover, it is essential to avoid making the mistake of regarding lifelong learning as important solely in terms of its economic benefits. Education is first and foremost about personal development, and vocational skills are secondary to this.

(3) Innovation in teaching and learning

25. The CoR shares the Commission's view that ICT-based learning technologies offer great potential for innovation in teaching and learning methods, but they must be used in the appropriate context. The less well educated find it more difficult to cope single-handed with ICT and distance technologies, and therefore need more guidance. The CoR would also emphasise the need to discuss how such informal learning environments - where people can learn together - could be developed, and what shape they might take.

(4) Valuing learning

26. The CoR is aware of the higher demand for recognition of learning and skills attainment. However, the CoR feels there is a risk that this could lead to complicated technical systems for assessing knowledge, or systems where the individual is treated more as an object rather than being given the support he needs to get his skills recognised and documented.
27. Such systems can frighten people and be counterproductive. It is thus important to consider the individual as the carrier of information and skills. The European language portfolio is an interesting example here.

(5) Rethinking guidance and counselling

28. The CoR agrees that guidance must be available locally and be promoted by means of networks. Local access to modern information technology will be important. Initiatives should not be restricted to the provision of course information or choice of future career but must provide effective support for personal and career planning, and encourage people who have less positive memories of their schooldays.

(6) Bringing learning closer to home

29. The CoR fully endorses the Commission's view that resources need to be mobilised for lifelong learning at local level, and believes it is important that the debate be launched at local and regional level.
30. The CoR notes that the Memorandum states that for most people, from childhood to old age, learning happens locally. Local and regional authorities are the ones that provide the infrastructure for access to lifelong learning, including childcare, respite care for family members, social welfare services and transport. It is therefore very important to mobilise resources in support of lifelong learning locally and regionally.
31. The CoR agrees that it is essential that education and lifelong learning should be available as close to the learner as possible. If the various parts of the European Union are to be included in the knowledge-based economy, then skills updating facilities and access to lifelong learning must be provided in the local community.
32. Geographical access should also be seen in conjunction with other measures to improve access for the individual, both in terms of structure and organisation:

- daytime/evening and weekend courses;
- courses during summer and traditional holiday periods;
- frequent course start dates;
- distance learning;
- guided flexible learning.

33. The creation of a local infrastructure for lifelong learning need not necessarily involve specific, distinct activities. It could build as far as possible on existing operations, backed up by the missing key functions. The CoR thus sees no need for any standardised local learning centres.
34. The CoR therefore fully endorses the view that the concept of lifelong learning must be available to people of all ages, and from all backgrounds and circumstances, since continuous skills development is essential to every region's and society's survival and development potential.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

1. The CoR believes that a successful European lifelong learning strategy presupposes local and regional fixed objectives, and will require effective follow-up systems. This will make it possible to track development trends and goals attainment, and make comparative analyses.

2. A lifelong learning strategy also requires the development of statistics and indicators. According to the Commission document, existing education statistics place a greater emphasis on formal education and training systems rather than on individuals or companies.
3. The CoR believes that resources will probably have to be re-allocated to support the growth of non-formal and informal learning.
4. The CoR welcomes the fact that the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Youth, elearning and Culture 2000 action programmes are seen as a fillip to the European dimension of lifelong learning.
5. The CoR believes there will be a need for a systematic mobilisation of all possible learning stakeholders at local and regional level.
6. The CoR believes that the Memorandum's ambitious objectives for lifelong and lifewide learning will make demands on coordination efforts, infrastructure, institutional frameworks and cooperation. But a lifelong, lifewide learning initiative which includes people of all ages, from all educational levels and from different areas of the EU cannot be designed and imposed from above. It must be planned according to people's needs and circumstances, and underpinned by needs and circumstances identified at local and regional level.
7. The CoR believes that the local and regional authorities alone are in a position to deal with the issues addressed in point 1.30 above. The important task at national - or where appropriate federal state, or corresponding level - should be to foster a climate which encourages individuals, firms and public sector players to invest in education and learning.
8. The CoR considers it essential, however, for existing best practice in terms of lifelong learning infrastructure to be taken on board and disseminated. A concrete initiative would be to launch a web-based conference providing examples of local contributions to the infrastructure from all over Europe, and the opportunity to get in touch. The CoR also believes that a European database should be created.
9. The CoR believes that a Commission/CoR cooperation committee should be set up to carry forward the drive for lifelong learning, since these issues impact so heavily on local and regional authorities. The cooperation committee could also play an important role in the enlarged EU of the future.

Brussels, 14 June 2001.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General

of the

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 210, 14.8.1995, p.74

² OJ C 315, 13.10.1998, p.9

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