

**SOC/001**  
**(ex SOC/364)**  
**Second phase of the Community**  
**action programme in the field of**  
**education**

Brussels, 15 October 1998

**OPINION**

of the

Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing the**  
**second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education "Socrates"**

(COM(98) 329 final - 98/0195 COD)

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On 15 September 1998, the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 198 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing the second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education "Socrates"*  
(COM(98) 329 final - 98/0195 COD).

The Section for Social, Family, Educational and Cultural Affairs, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on this subject, adopted its opinion on 16 July 1998. The rapporteur was **Mr Rodríguez García Caro**.

The Committee decided to appoint **Mr Rodríguez García Caro** as rapporteur-general to draw up this opinion.

At its 358th plenary session held on 14/15 October 1998 (meeting of 15 October), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 90 votes in favour with one abstention:

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The Economic and Social Committee issued two opinions on the first phase of Socrates. The opinion on the draft decision establishing Socrates was adopted by the Committee at its plenary session held on 27 and 28 April 1994. The second opinion, on the proposed amendment of the decision, was adopted by the plenary session on 28 May 1997.

In relation to the points put forward in both opinions, the Committee wishes to make the following comments:

- First of all, the Committee's recommendations were well reflected in the design and development of the programme. Both the first phase and the proposal currently under examination contain aspects which the Committee advocated from the very outset.
- Secondly, some of the difficulties raised in the programme assessment were originally highlighted in the two earlier opinions. The inadequacy of the funds earmarked for the first phase, the information and coordination problems which the Committee anticipated as a result of excessive decentralization and the need to ensure dissemination of the results, were all foreseeable pitfalls which have been borne out in the implementation of the programme.

The Committee trusts that its input will continue to be welcomed and that the difficulties encountered in the implementation of Socrates will be reduced to a minimum or ironed out completely.

1.2 The good results obtained in the first phase of the programme and the need to further pursue the mandate of Article 126 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, have

prompted the presentation of this draft decision which has been submitted to the Committee for a mandatory opinion.

## 2. General comments

2.1 The Committee welcomes the draft decision and is pleased that the Socrates Community action programme is to be continued through the establishment of a second phase. On the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Community will thus be encouraging and supporting a basic pillar of EU citizenship, in the shape of access to a high-quality education and training system which enables EU citizens to attain the level of skills and competitiveness required of them by society today.

2.2 The plethora of programmes and actions designed to achieve sometimes identical objectives requires considerable coordination and cooperation in order to ensure that the measures introduced and the related resources are applied efficiently.

Consequently, the Committee welcomes the move to promote joint actions with other Community initiatives geared towards improving knowledge.

2.3 In its opinion on the first phase of Socrates and in relation to the Socrates action aimed at the children of migrant workers, gypsies, travellers and persons with itinerant occupations, the Committee called for the children of refugees and asylum seekers to be explicitly included until such time as their legal situation was fully resolved. Examination of the annexes containing initiatives for the second phase reveals no such measures for these groups of people.

The xenophobic and racist attitudes which are widespread throughout EU Member States call for all possible efforts to be made to eradicate behaviour, customs and ideologies which contravene the most fundamental human rights. With this in mind, the definitive text of the decision should include a specific reference to refugees and asylum seekers in addition to the groups of people already mentioned, so that we may continue to strive for a Europe of human rights.

2.4 The decision should include specific provisions for upholding the principle of equal opportunities and positive discrimination when calculating the amount of financial assistance, as in the case of persons with disabilities. Particular emphasis should be placed on the need to introduce corrective mechanisms in the allocation of resources, to ensure that those with lower incomes are guaranteed higher levels of assistance and grants.

It is important to ensure that level of income does not form a barrier for people who wish to take part in a Socrates action.

2.5 The streamlining of procedures and structures introduced in the second phase of the programme should improve its management. The Committee supports this organizational and operational overhaul and trusts that it will serve to boost effectiveness and efficiency in Socrates as a whole.

However, these measures need to be underpinned by additional efforts to disseminate information on the programme to all persons who may be interested in Socrates actions. The European knowledge centres could prove an excellent tool for bringing together information and disseminating results.

2.6 Teacher and pupil mobility under the measures developed is one of the key components of the programme. According to Commission statistics, out of 4 million teachers in the Community, 60,000 have been involved in study visits abroad. The percentages are similar for pupils. However, the mobility figures for people involved in the programme shed no light on how many people have received assistance on more than one occasion.

Repeating a comment made in its last opinion on the programme, the Committee considers that the Commission and Member States need to introduce mechanisms to allocate and monitor funding so that the greatest possible number of people are able to have access to Socrates, ensuring that assistance is not monopolized by specific individuals or institutions.

2.7 The Committee takes the view that the budget allocation earmarked for the second phase provides a certain degree of financial leeway to accommodate projects and assistance which may be requested under Socrates. The Committee's repeated recommendations for an increase in allocations to Socrates and the programmes preceding it, have thus been met.

The funding earmarked does not, however, seem overly generous, as it must be taken into account that the promotion of new initiatives within existing actions, the inevitable increase in the number of projects submitted, the easing of access to the programme for non-Community European countries, and the need to meet the expectations raised by Socrates in the educational community, may mean that the financial allocation will not satisfy the demand generated.

2.8 Turning to the relationship between the financial resources available and the requests for project funding, the Committee restates its preference for quality over quantity. Socrates has consolidated its position and is widely acknowledged for the work it carries out. Its priority concern should not, therefore, be the number of projects approved, but rather the quality of these and their future benefits for the educational community.

One of the key aims of this new phase is to improve the dissemination of project results. This means seeking high-quality projects that receive adequate financing, and disregarding quantity as an assessment criterion.

2.9 The use of new communication technologies should receive sufficient support through the programme's actions. The Committee agrees with the proposal's emphasis on the use of multimedia for educational purposes.

In relation to multimedia educational software, the Committee opinion on the Commission Communication: Review of reactions to the White Paper "Teaching and learning: towards the learning society" pointed out that the time had come for the Community as a whole to

commit itself to the use of European multimedia educational tools, providing teachers with additional training in new technologies so that they could deploy and teach these new tools.

Socrates provides an opportunity to put these ideas into practice. The framework of measures which it contains gives reason to be optimistic that new technologies will be widely implemented in education and training.

2.10 The Committee welcomes the fact that the programme allows for the widest possible variety in the submission of education-related projects. The Committee feels that the wide access offered, and the flexible structure of the actions covered, will allow the programme to adjust and open up to innovations during its life span.

2.11 The Committee urges Member States to play a synergic role in this Community effort to support the European dimension of education and promote quality education. Without the active involvement of Member States, the programmes will not be able to reach their target public. Improving information, removing the obstacles to participation by fostering the recognition of experience and qualifications, and making it easier to disseminate project results throughout the country, are some of the measures which Member States need to introduce.

2.12 The Committee calls the Commission's attention to the interest aroused in civil society by the Socrates programme. It is therefore necessary in this new phase of the programme to involve the socio-economic players more closely in its implementation.

### 3. **Specific comments**

3.1 The Committee opinion on the draft decision amending Decision 819/95/EC establishing the Socrates programme called for the funds allocated to Comenius to be increased as far as possible.

The Committee recommends that sufficient resources be allocated to this action, as it is targeted at the most receptive EU population group, namely school pupils, and will thus have a heightened impact.

3.2 Mobility is one of the cornerstones of the broad Socrates programme and it is implemented mainly through the Comenius, Erasmus and Lingua actions. The physical mobility of teachers and pupils could be complemented by virtual mobility for the educational community through new technologies applied to multimedia.

The Committee supports any initiative which uses multimedia to boost the mobility of EU citizens. Mobility-related activities provide the key to knowledge and understanding of the daily life and culture of a diverse Europe.

3.3 The Committee welcomes the Grundtvig action for two main reasons.

First of all, the Committee supports the idea of introducing an action for those who have left school without acquiring a firm grounding of knowledge. In this context, innovation has a vital role to play in taking an imaginative approach to seeking flexible and informal ways of acquiring knowledge. This option is open to those wishing to begin or resume training after a period away from education.

Secondly, life-long training is essential for everyone in this changing society which places so many demands on the individual. The risks incurred by not possessing or failing to update knowledge in themselves justify actions designed to promote life-long education and training. In its opinion on the Report from the Commission on Access to continuing training in the Union, the Committee stressed the need to promote and encourage policies that facilitate access to life-long training. In keeping with this position, the Committee wholeheartedly supports the Grundtvig action.

3.4 On many occasions and in several opinions, the Committee has stressed the need to strengthen and promote language-learning among EU citizens, and a number of recommendations and initiatives designed to boost language-learning have been put forward.

The Committee takes the view that the activities supported under Lingua should specifically include projects which promote bilingual or trilingual teaching by encouraging schools to arrange exchanges whereby teachers go abroad to teach school subjects in their mother tongue.

3.5 The second phase of Socrates includes an action described as "observation of education systems and policies", the aim of which is to help make European education systems more transparent by exchanging information and experiences.

Presented in such a way, this action seems attractive and timely were it not for the similarities and overlaps which it appears to have with the Eurydice information network on education in Europe.

The Committee endorses the aims being pursued and feels that it is more judicious to widen the remit and activities of existing, consolidated bodies than to establish new bodies which require additional funding to get them up and running.

3.6 The activities eligible for funding under this action include the establishment of indicators and assessment of quality in education.

The Committee opinion on the Proposal for a Council recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education supported such initiatives as a sure means of improving the end-product of the education system.

The proposal supported the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Network to conduct a number of tasks including:

- assistance to institutions wishing to cooperate in quality assessment and assurance in the Socrates thematic networks;
- creation of links between quality assessment and other activities under the Socrates and Leonardo programmes.

The draft recommendation also specified that the European Quality Assurance Network would be eligible for financial assistance under the Socrates and Leonardo programmes.

The Committee supports the establishment and use of quality-assessment indicators dovetailed with quality-assurance methods and therefore welcomes activities of this nature in the Socrates programme. However, the Committee is surprised at the failure to include the European Quality Assurance Network among the programme's activities, when the network could well provide the driving force behind the dissemination of quality assurance and facilitate the use of its methods.

3.7 Another activity covered by the "education observation" action relates to the financing of studies and projects on the recognition of diplomas and qualifications. This activity also overlaps with those of the Community network of national academic recognition information centres (Naric).

3.8 The "new innovatory initiatives" covered by the Observation and Innovation action look very promising in terms both of their approach and of their flexible arrangements for financing projects that foster innovation. The flexibility of the action means that it may be subsequently adapted to include innovatory initiatives emerging during the period covered by the programme. The Committee strongly supports this action.

3.9 Synergy between the various programmes relating to knowledge in all its shapes and forms is desirable from both an operational and practical point of view in order to make best use of the resources on offer.

The Committee supports the aims of the Socrates joint actions, and urges that possible calls for common proposals also involve activities under European Social Fund programmes for adult education.

3.10 Lastly, the Committee feels it appropriate that the programme's accompanying measures should include Socrates dissemination activities in those regions of the EU which submit fewer projects and request less assistance both quantitatively and proportionally. The success of Socrates, in terms of fulfilling the objectives set, hinges upon the genuine, across-the-board participation of educational establishments throughout Europe.

3.11 The Committee agrees that the programme should be more open to SMEs. It recommends that the programme should, from the outset, allow for closer cooperation between the educational world and business, especially SMEs and the craft industry.

Brussels, 15 October 1998.

The President  
of the  
Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the  
Economic and Social Committee

**Beatrice Rangoni Machiavelli**

**Patrick Venturini**

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