



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/227
Key competences for
lifelong learning

Brussels, 18 May 2006

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on the

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council

on key competences for lifelong learning

COM(2005) 548 final – 2005/0221 (COD)

On 28 November 2005 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning
COM(2005) 548 final – 2005/0221(COD).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 3 May 2006. The rapporteur was Mária Herczog.

At its 427th plenary session, held on 17-18 May 2006 (meeting of 18 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 124 votes to two, with three abstentions.

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1. **Executive summary**

- 1.1 The EESC strongly supports the Commission's recommendations concerning key competences for lifelong learning, which are fully consistent with the Lisbon strategy for a knowledge society and with the Employment Guidelines 2005-2008.
- 1.2 The EESC feels that the proposal, if implemented, could help to overcome current problems on the labour market, particularly in terms of narrowing the gap between economic needs and preparation of the available workforce.
- 1.3 The focus in training on developing key competences could also help to achieve the important common objective of ensuring that by the end of initial education and training young people have developed the key competences to a level that equips them for adult life and successful participation in the labour market either as employees or entrepreneurs, and that adults are able to develop and update these competences throughout their lives, based on a solid foundation of general knowledge which is one of the keys to the capacity for ongoing adaptation.
- 1.4 Among the instruments for achieving this objective, the EESC feels that it is particularly important to prepare teachers to provide effective support for students in secondary education, vocational education and adult education in acquiring key competences, with teachers themselves acquiring or continuously developing the key competences which they need for their work.

- 1.5 Besides supporting the general objectives, the EESC feels that it is especially important to ensure that young people dropping out of school should have the opportunity through non-formal training programmes of receiving assistance in acquiring the key competences outlined in the proposal.
- 1.6 Given the ageing population, older workers must be kept on the labour market longer, so the EESC also feels that it is particularly important for older workers in the Member States to have the opportunity to acquire competences which they lack, and for Member States to set up learning infrastructures to enable competences which have already been acquired to be maintained and developed.
- 1.7 The EESC acknowledges the cardinal role of the social partners, as the main players in the labour market, in the process of implementing and monitoring the goals set. Joint action by Europe's social partners in lifelong learning during their first multiannual work programme (2003-2005) resulted in the Framework of Actions for Lifelong Development of Competences and Qualifications, and further activities are envisaged for the 2006-2008 programme, in which Europe's social partners will negotiate on a possible voluntary agreement in this area.
- 1.8 The EESC also calls for a more active participation of NGOs in the whole process and recommends strengthening dialogue with civil society.
- 1.9 It is extremely important for reliable statistics to be available in order to monitor and evaluate progress towards achieving lifelong learning objectives. The EESC therefore supports the Commission's proposal for a regulation concerning the compilation of lifelong learning statistics. The regulation puts in place frameworks capable of ensuring harmonisation or standardisation of the methods used by Member States to compile statistics, thus enhancing the reliability and comparability of data. An effort must be made to ensure that surveys provide reliable and constantly updated statistics enabling analysis of the main aspects of EU policy objectives.

2. **Introduction**¹

- 2.1 After a lengthy process of research, preparation and consultation, the Commission has presented its proposal establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning. The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes this development and points out that the purpose of the ideas set out in the present opinion is to make the Commission's proposal more effective and practical.

¹ EESC opinion on the " Integrated action programme in lifelong learning " – SOC/176 - rapporteur Mr Koryfidis – O.J. C 221, 8.9.2005.

2.2 The EESC's view of the Commission's proposal is therefore based mainly on its knowledge and experience in connection with:

- the delay in achieving the Lisbon objectives;
- the delay in matching education and training with productivity²
- the demographic situation in Europe; and
- the concerns which have recently arisen at European and international level to find solutions to these problems³.

3. **Outline of the Commission's proposal**

3.1 A Working Group on basic skills, established in 2001 in the context of Education and Training 2010 work programme, has developed a framework of key competences⁴ needed in a knowledge society and prepared a number of recommendations on ensuring that everyone can acquire them⁵.

3.2 The main common objective is to ensure that by the end of initial education and training young people have developed the key competences to a level that equips them for adult life, and that adults are able to develop and update them throughout their lives.

3.3 The proposal identifies the following key competences: 1) communication in the mother tongue; 2) communication in foreign languages; 3) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) digital competence; 5) learning to learn; 6) interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence; 7) entrepreneurship, and 8) cultural expression. The proposal defines competences as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context.

3.4 Work in the area of key competences ties in closely with many other initiatives or other ongoing activity, such as the current work on developing a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), or the endeavours to make qualifications systems more transparent (for example by recognising knowledge acquired through informal learning).

² EESC opinion on "Training and productivity" (SOC/183), 28.10.2004 – rapporteur: Mr Koryfidis - OJ C 120, 20.05.2005.

³ See March 2005 Kok Report (http://europa.eu.int/comm/lisbon_strategy/pdf/2004-1866-EN-complet.pdf).

⁴ The Working Group preferred the term "competence" that refers to a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes and "key competence" to define competences necessary for all. It thus includes basic skills, but goes beyond them.

⁵ Working group on Basic skills, progress reports 2003, 2004: http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/objectives_en.html#basic.

- 3.5 The proposal provides a reference tool identifying those key competences necessary for all, and thus supports Member States in their endeavours to ensure that key competences are integrated into their lifelong learning strategies.
- 3.6 The aim of this reference tool is to assist political decision-makers, providers of training services, employers, and learners themselves in achieving common objectives at national and European level.
- 3.7 The recommendation defines the key competences needed by all citizens in the knowledge-based economy and society. It acknowledges that implementation decisions must be taken at national, regional and/or local level. The recommendation calls for Member States to ensure the acquisition of key competences by all by the end of initial education and training and, in the light of the European reference criteria, encourages them to tackle educational inequalities.
- 3.8 With regard to adult learners, the recommendation calls on Member States, with the involvement of the social partners, to put in place a comprehensive infrastructure ensuring that the elderly also have access to tools for developing competences.
- 3.9 Finally, the proposal urges the Commission to support reforms at national level through peer learning, exchange of best practice, and regular evaluation of progress towards implementation of objectives.
- 3.10 The proposal has no implication for the Community budget.

4. The EESC's general comments

- 4.1 The Recommendation aims to support efforts by Member States to develop their basic education and training systems as well as their adult education and training provision, and the entire lifelong learning system, by providing a reference tool on key competences. Although there is still legitimate scope – and a need for – specialist discussions on the precise notion of competences, taken as a whole the Recommendation clearly identifies the course which should be set for the development of basic schooling and adult education.
- 4.2 In its earlier opinion on training and efficiency⁶, the EESC criticised all of the Member States for the lack of consistency and inadequate coordination between training systems. According to the EESC, continuing vocational education systems operated in isolation from the rest of the educational sector, and the link to their social and economic environment was also weak. The content of training was generally too strongly geared to short-term needs, which in the longer term could take things in the wrong direction. With this in mind, the Committee feels that the proposals for key competences could provide general points of reference common to

⁶ EESC opinion on "Training and productivity" (SOC/183), 28.10.2004 – rapporteur: Mr Koryfidis - OJ C 120, 20.5.2005.

the various training programmes, and they could also represent one of the options for organising closer coordination between the activities of the various training sub-systems.

- 4.3 The variety of interpretations of key competences and the divergent nature of practical programmes based on those concepts is closely reflected in the evaluation of how the EU strategy is implemented. There is a long-standing debate both within and outside the EU on scientific and practical definitions of competence. For example, in a separate project (Definition and Selection of Competencies - DeSeCo) the OECD defined the competences which were seen as the most important (and which only partially overlap with the key competences set out in the proposal for a Recommendation).
- 4.4 The acquisition of skills which are marketable and necessary for social success takes place in a context of competition between social groups and individuals, in keeping with the logic of the "knowledge-based society". One of the objectives of government measures and strategic training programmes should be to provide equal access and opportunities for all.
- 4.5 In line with the text of the Recommendation, it should be pointed out in connection with lifelong learning and competences that there must be a focus not only on acquiring various skills but also on maintaining skills which have already been acquired through special programmes.
- 4.6 Implementing the recommendations on key competences is a major challenge for the education and training systems of the Member States. Integrating them – especially in basic training, and particularly in educational systems which have not moved on from a rigid subject-based approach – calls for a fundamentally new approach.
- 4.7 The Recommendation presents at least as much of a challenge in terms of preparing teachers and changing their attitudes. The EESC therefore feels that it is particularly important to prepare teachers to provide effective support for students in secondary education, vocational education and adult education in acquiring key competences, with teachers themselves acquiring or continuously developing the key competences which they need for their work.
- 4.8 The proposal sees support for the acquisition of competences needed by older age groups⁷ as an issue with important implications for social cohesion. In working towards higher employment as a priority EU objective, the individual Member States are concentrating their attention and training resources – including special programmes to develop competences – on people in initial training and the working-age population; however, many questions about the lack of competences among older age groups are rightly being asked. A marked generation gap already exists in certain fields, such as digital literacy. In many Member States, the strategic objectives which are defined at national level – such as e-government, or ensuring

7

"Older age groups" are defined as people who are not in employment, and/or who have definitively ceased any kind of employment.

online accessibility of information and services which are important for citizens – make exercising the right to information or social participation dependent on basic competences (e.g. basic IT skills). As a result, if the elderly and other disadvantaged groups are not included in programmes to support acquisition of the most important competences, there may be negative repercussions for social cohesion.

4.9 Given the complexity of the education policy issues involved in implementing competence-based training, it is extremely important to have an ongoing exchange of views among those working in the field throughout the EU; the results of this should be widely available. Due to the complexity of the subject, it would be helpful for the Commission, in compliance with the tasks entrusted to it by the TEC and the principle of subsidiarity, to provide support to educational policy specialists in the Member States, not only in formulating objectives but also in identifying possible ways, means and stumbling-blocks. (As well as focusing on examples of best practice, the exchange of experiences should also provide for opportunities to learn through the analysis of failures).

5. **Compilation of statistics on lifelong learning**

5.1 In this respect, the subject of lifelong learning is closely connected with the proposal for a regulation on statistics concerning lifelong learning⁸.

5.2 The proposal for a regulation arose from the EU's ever-growing need for comparable statistics and indicators relating to education, training and lifelong learning, as these facilitate use of the open method of coordination in the fields of education and training policy.

5.2.1 To date, cooperation and exchange of statistics between Member States has been based on verbal agreements. The aim of the proposal is to establish a legal basis for a sustainable system for producing educational statistics, which could represent a starting point for dialogue on European-level policies in various areas.

5.2.2 The aim is to put in place a framework encompassing all current and planned measures in the field of lifelong learning statistics (with the exception of corporate training measured by the Continuing Vocational Training Survey, which was recently the subject of separate legislation).

5.2.3 The proposal only applies to educational, training and lifelong learning statistics submitted to the European Commission for the purposes of producing Community statistics.

⁸ Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the production and development of statistics on education and lifelong learning. COM(2005) 625 final – 2005/0248 (COD).

- 5.2.4 The main objective of the regulation is to develop common statistical standards enabling harmonised production of statistics, and thus to establish a common framework for the systematic production of Community statistics on education and lifelong learning.
- 5.3 It is extremely important for the objectives of the EU strategy to be defined in such a way as to reflect a realistic overview of the processes concerned. It is at least equally important for evaluations which are seen to be appropriate during the implementation of strategies to be able to draw on the methodologically reliable, regularly conducted compilation of data and data sets, and on the conclusions which can be deduced from them. Data and indicators suitable for drawing international comparisons must be available.
- 5.3.1 In practice, there is extremely unequal access to training; furthermore, rather than compensating for existing differences, post-school, adult education further accentuates them (according to existing surveys on this issue). Regular provision of data based on standard principles and methods can support monitoring and evaluation of this issue.
- 5.4 At present, various educational, training and adult learning fields are covered by a series of international statistical surveys which are organised in parallel or largely independently of one another. EU statistical systems are insufficient to cover the area as a whole on their own, even using the new statistical surveys which are currently beginning. There are certain differences between Eurostat and other statistical organisations in terms of surveys, their content and purpose.
- 5.5 In the interests of making rational use of resources, overlaps between regular surveys should be avoided unless technically warranted; at the same time, there should be systematic efforts to ensure that the results of various surveys can be inter-related. This can be achieved only if there is close cooperation with specialist bodies outside the EU (the OECD's International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)) and use of their surveys.
- 5.6 In the current situation, close technical cooperation with organisations outside the EU is extremely important, given that measurement of key competences is not one of the tasks falling within the remit of Eurostat. (The surveys conducted by the OECD, especially the PISA study and the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which is currently being developed, could play a leading role in the assessment of competences.)
- 5.7 There is a very strong need for statistics which contribute to the development of policies and for data which support the evaluation of outcomes; indeed, the demand for up-to-date statistics is growing significantly. It is extremely important for Member States to use identical methods for the compilation of statistics, and the reliability and comparability of such statistics must be a primary consideration.

6. **Specific observations**

- 6.1 It is very expensive to operate statistical systems. With this in mind, the EESC feels that, depending on Member States' capacities, it would be worth considering the long-term feasibility of shortening the five-year cycle for compiling statistics on lifelong learning, i.e. of conducting more frequent surveys. In terms of collecting data on subjects of particular relevance from a political perspective, supplementing broad statistical surveys with targeted studies at intervals of as little as one year and smaller-scale surveys could represent a short-term solution. These targeted surveys and analyses based on them would enable the monitoring of processes of particular political relevance, and evaluation of progress towards achieving EU lifelong learning objectives.
- 6.2 Given that company training courses represent an important sector of lifelong learning activity, it would be worth including statistics on such courses in the scope of the proposed regulation. Some company training courses (training in companies with ten or more employees) are already covered by the five-yearly Eurostat Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS); however, this does not include data on training provided by companies with fewer than ten employees.

Brussels, 18 May 2006.

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