

COM-7/038

Brussels, 23 October 2001

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of

19 September 2001

on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament

The eLearning Action Plan

Designing tomorrow's education

(COM(2001) 172 final)

The Committee of the Regions

HAVING REGARD TO the Report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament on The eLearning Action Plan *Designing tomorrow's education* COM(2001) 172 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the European Commission of 19 April 2001, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee on this matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the Bureau of the Committee of the Regions of 12 June 2001 to instruct Commission 7 - Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport, Citizens' Rights - to draw up the relevant opinion;

HAVING REGARD TO the Draft Opinion adopted by Commission 7 on 29 June 2001 CdR 212/2001 rev.1 (rapporteur: **Irma Peiponen**)

adopted the following Opinion unanimously at its 40th plenary session of 19/20 September 2001 (meeting of 19 September):

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS' VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's eLearning Action Plan and considers it ambitious in terms of its objectives. Effort and motivation are required if Europe is to play a leading intellectual role in human resource development. Indeed the Committee of the Regions considers it important to develop competitiveness in all those activities which support the eEurope Action Plan. The main tools are eLearning and lifelong learning. The Member States' strength must be emphasised during implementation of the eLearning Action Plan, in order to ensure European competitiveness in, for example, the development of digital technology. The Action Plan provides the opportunity to use the EU's different programmes and funding and to seek out synergy. The Committee would point out that the **open co-ordination procedure** agreed on by the European Council did not modify Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty, and so the Community's limited terms of reference in the field of education have not been extended.
2. eLearning is high on the CoR agenda. The Committee considers it important for local and regional authorities to be involved in the development and application of open coordination so that their experience and service evaluation procedures are taken into account. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that its expertise as the representative of local and regional authorities is employed at the European level in developing and applying the open coordination method. This helps to create partnership which is necessary for achieving effective results.
3. When the eLearning Action Plan is being implemented at the national level, Member States must, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle and the distribution of powers, seek to work in partnership with local and regional authorities.
4. In many Member States local and regional government have key responsibilities in the field education and training. They have an important role in:
 - the delivery of multimedia educational services, the development of infrastructures and provision of equipment;
 - the development of school networks, exchanges of experience as is the case in certain regions;
 - the promotion of innovative training practices, as major employers and service providers, they have direct experience in managing the introduction of new technologies in training programmes and can offer role model;
 - the promotion of public and private partnerships at local level which are crucial in funding necessary infrastructure and services. They can encourage in particular start up funding mechanisms;

- ensuring that the needs of both producers and users are met whilst not compromising the content of the educational material and ensuring full respect of cultural and linguistic diversity by effectively involving relevant actors, parents, pupils, social partners, minority groups alongside industry;
 - the promotion of equitable access to new technologies: key role in ensuring all schools including peripheral areas and disadvantaged areas are able to benefit from new technologies and that all means are available to them.
 - also extending access to new technologies to children in hospital or convalescing at home, to pupils with special educational needs, and to adults who require basic or up-dated learning in order to ensure their social integration.
5. The establishment of high quality infrastructure requires generous resources. A tight timetable is in itself to be welcomed, but realistically the objectives require funding additional to that of the Structural Funds, which cannot be left solely to the responsibility of local and regional authorities. The Committee of the Regions expects the Commission to present funding proposals. A redirecting of resources should not result in a reduction in the resources actually available for teaching.
 6. Equipment planners and designers must improve user-friendliness. This is particularly important for groups at risk of exclusion. Moreover, there should be no obstacles in access to eLearning for the disabled.
 7. In addition to new technology, consideration must also be given to the use of different distribution channels in order to enhance the current level of service. For example, the use of digital technology in television transmission may provide new practical solutions for remote and sparsely populated areas. The Committee of the Regions considers it important for the eLearning Action Plan to be implemented in a way which promotes regional equality.
 8. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's wish to develop eLearning indicators and to report on both quantitative and qualitative progress. The indicators must take into account the type of digital literacy demanded by different situations. As stated in previous opinions, the Committee of the Regions wants to be involved in developing training indicators and reiterates the need to involve local and regional authorities in their development.
 9. The promotion of independent information and information distribution channels is important for the success of the eLearning Action Plan. Students, information seekers and teachers must have extensive information reserves at their disposal. This is why the various players must have access to decentralised data banks. These high quality data bases must be accessible through different distribution channels. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission's proposal to link schools to the research network.
 10. eLearning will create an entirely new kind of learning environment in schools. The role of teachers and schools will change considerably, and this may present cultural difficulties. There are positive experiences tailoring tuition to needs through virtual schools and universities. Motivation for network-study and virtual mobility can be promoted through new

networks and events (e.g. European Schoolnet, Netd@ys).

11. The Commission must create a portal for the exchange of good practice.
12. eLearning is however merely a means of improving learning in further education, working life and as a citizen in society. The EU's priority areas (foreign languages, natural sciences, technology and society, culture and citizenship) contribute to achieving the general education and training objectives and are compatible with the eLearning Action Plan.
13. The new learning environment must not lose touch with reality. Responsibility for the social, individual and ethical education of children and young people must also be assumed in the digital age. Information obtained from the Internet and other forms of multimedia must be viewed as critically as information obtained from traditional channels.
14. Schools and learners must be encouraged to take part in new learning communities, as learning is always a social process. Distant learners should also have an opportunity to meet each other. Multilingual eLearning communities in particular contribute to improving mutual understanding in Europe.
15. The shift away from traditional teaching methods to the full-scale use of new technology is a considerable step and requires commitment to the training of teachers, principals and instructors, as well as dialogue between teachers and pupils. Implementation of the Action Plan must give sufficient emphasis to these elements.
16. eLearning is part of lifelong learning. NGOs, trade unions and different kinds of adult education institutes can provide each student with teaching which is quantitatively and qualitatively appropriate. People have different needs. For those at risk of exclusion, digital literacy is a way of improving their employability and making them more active as citizens.
17. To ensure the creation of a successful eLearning environment, special attention must be paid to content production and the quality of learning, while bearing in mind the human dimension of education objectives and the interaction between people. The Committee of the Regions feels that a far-reaching dialogue must be initiated on intellectual property rights and conditions governing payment of authors.
18. Teaching materials are culturally rooted. In order to preserve cultural diversity the Commission must support content production in minority languages, as it is not profitable to produce a large range of digital material for small numbers of users. Cultural and linguistic diversity must be included among the indicators.
19. Content production must be funded by the Structural Funds or through training and cultural programmes, on condition that the Open Source principle is applied. However the ambitious timetable also requires the EU to make an additional contribution. The Committee of the Regions is waiting for the Commission to produce an initiative on additional funding.
20. Developing employability is one of the main objectives of education and training. As the skills in demand change rapidly in the knowledge-based new economy, partnership is required between education and training establishments and companies. The Committee of the Regions has frequently stressed the importance of training in an entrepreneurial society, and local and regional authorities are part of this partnership. The advantages of cooperation are two-way: the region prospers if its citizens manage to find work as a result of high quality education and training, while companies benefit from employees with the right skills. Partnership should not entail the commercialisation of training. Partnership also works well with regard to lifelong learning. Local and regional authorities can encourage small

companies to join in efforts to seek out new opportunities in innovative ways.

21. The Committee of the Regions also wishes to emphasise that NGOs and trade unions should be involved in public-private partnership. Indeed in many Member States it is grass-roots players who have the main responsibility for implementing the eLearning objectives. However a variety of players must be brought together to discuss the objectives and how they are to be implemented.
22. The Committee of the Regions considers it important for the eLearning project to extend beyond the network of educational establishments, for example to libraries, museums, sport and leisure centres. It is essential for these activities to be undertaken at the grass-roots level. Local and regional authorities also have a key role to play here.
23. The Committee of the Regions is concerned about the prospects of applying the eLearning action programme in the applicant countries. Efforts must also be made to ensure that these countries have sufficient infrastructure at their disposal and that digital literacy is a possibility for all.

Brussels, 19 September 2001.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

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