

EDUC 008

Brussels, 16 December 2002

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 20 November 2002

on the

Communication from the Commission on the Action Plan for skills and mobility

(COM(2002) 72 final)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission on the Action Plan for skills and mobility COM(2002) 72 final;

Having regard to the European Commission decision of 20 February 2002 to consult it under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau on 12 March 2002 to instruct Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an Opinion on this subject;

Having regard to its Opinion on the Proposal for a Council Directive concerning the *Status of Third-Country nationals who are long-term residents* (CdR 213/2001)¹;

Having regard to its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission - *Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality* (CdR 49/2002 fin);

Having regard to the European Parliament Draft Report of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs on the *Commission's Action Plan for skills and Mobility*, PE 316-348 (rapporteur: **Mrs Regina Bastos**)

Having regard to its Draft Opinion (CdR 138/2002 rev. 2) adopted on 30 September 2002 by its Commission for Culture and Education (rapporteur: **Mrs Jennette Arnold**, Member of the Greater

London Authority (UK-PES));

Whereas:

- 1) the European Union calls for the commitment of all actors, including local and regional authorities, to achieve the goal for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion as laid down in the Lisbon European Council;
- 2) the development of the skills of EU citizens contributes to the goal of creating a competitive economy;
- 3) local and regional authorities are driving forces behind regional economies and play a key role in bringing together the partnerships needed to create a more responsive learning and training environment in order to increase occupational mobility;
- 4) increasing skills and geographic mobility should be seen in the context of sustainable development and of the general cohesion of the Union.

adopted the following opinion at its 47th plenary session on 20-21 November 2002 (meeting of 20 November).

1. **The Committee of the Regions' views and recommendations**

The Committee of the Regions

1. **welcomes** the Commission Action Plan on Skills and Mobility which promotes human-resource development, in the context of achieving the Lisbon goal of creating the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world;
2. **agrees** with the Commission's view that a skilled and adaptable labour force, which is able to access employment across the EU, is essential to ensure greater competitiveness, employability and the development of social cohesion. The Committee of the Regions emphasises the strategic role local and regional authorities play in developing human-resource policies which are responsive to the needs of the individual and the labour market;
3. **is concerned** that issues of inclusion and equal opportunities are not adequately addressed in the Action Plan. Tackling barriers to lifelong learning because of discrimination and lack of basic skills is key to creating a competitive economy particularly in the context of an ageing population;
4. **sees** EU programmes as playing a crucial role in developing skills and geographic mobility in the Union. Programmes should continue to access all groups facing barriers to employment or labour-market progression and greater effort should be made to improve the links between human-resource measures and other aspects of Structural Funds such as ERDF and Community initiatives;
5. **stresses** that local and regional authorities often seek to implement sound measures, such as training courses, designed to improve skills and mobility, but sometimes are obliged to give up for want of funds. Greater financial support from the EU would

enable local and regional authorities to put more of their proposals into practice;

6. **believes** that occupational mobility and geographic mobility empower individuals and provide them with the opportunity to take free and responsible decisions for their own lives. However, increased geographical mobility should not be at the expense of the sustainable development and cohesion of the EU. Geographic mobility can produce economic imbalances, particularly in rural areas, where increased mobility of the young results in an ageing population. In order to ensure that geographic mobility does not take on a negative connotation, specific economic support should be provided for rural areas and other areas at risk of depopulation, and training schemes should be devised to give young people the opportunity to undertake more highly skilled employment in these areas. If appropriate measures are not taken to counter this phenomenon, as recommended by the Committee, the accession of the candidate countries could lead to an exacerbation of this problem;
7. **urges** the Commission to undertake an assessment of migration on departure regions as well as destination regions particularly in terms of local services such as housing, education, health and social services.

2. Occupational mobility

The Committee of the Regions

1. **agrees** with the Commission that fundamental to creating a dynamic competitive European economy is the encouragement of job mobility;
2. **wishes** to stress that job mobility cannot be encouraged unless individuals have good basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT and basic employability skills. In particular, it is essential that young people receive a high standard of basic skills, including social skills before leaving the educational system. Language learning from the earliest age is also essential. Moreover, as outlined in the CoR Opinion on the *Communication on Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*, CdR 49/2002 fin (rapporteur **Mrs Christina Tallberg**), the CoR sees understanding and respect of fellow citizens as part of the key skills individuals need in a more integrated European economy;
3. **is concerned** that the Action Plan does not adequately address the issue of access to learning for all. The CoR believes that increasing access to learning for all the citizens of Europe is of fundamental importance and the key to ensuring that the Lisbon goals are achieved. Increased demand for higher skills and particularly developments in ICT tend to marginalise those with low skills. The CoR emphasises equal opportunities for all regardless of race, ethnic origin, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, or religion, and stresses the importance of creating a social infrastructure to support those facing barriers to learning, in particular through the provision of childcare and elderly care to enable women to learn;
4. **agrees** with the European Commission that educational establishments and learning providers need to become more responsive to the needs of learners and the labour market. The CoR believes that competitiveness of business is dependent on its ability to adapt to continually developing technology and on the ability of the workforce to adapt to these changes. The Committee **urges** the Commission to assess how increased labour mobility will affect the need for education and labour demand at regional and

national level;

5. **would strongly emphasise** the leading role of local and regional authorities in mobilising partnerships between all the actors at local level and between geographical areas within EU Member States that share common characteristics in terms of sectors of economic development, and therefore common training and labour-force needs. The CoR also stresses the importance of promoting specific programmes to support occupational mobility by means of partnerships involving businesses and public authorities;
6. **welcomes** the establishment of a network of industry/educational advisory bodies to strengthen cooperation between the world of work and the educational systems. Given the strategic role local and regional authorities play in developing these partnerships, the CoR calls for the inclusion of local and regional authorities in such networks;
7. **believes** that occupational mobility cannot be achieved without joint recognition of qualifications. The CoR supports Commission action to develop instruments supporting the transparency and transferability of qualifications and in particular the recognition of non-formal learning;
8. **supports** the development of a "modular" system for the accumulation of qualifications. The CoR feels that there is scope to link such a system to Community training and exchange programmes so as to increase the transparency and openness of European qualifications systems
9. **agrees** with the Commission that resources should be made available for investment in human resources, especially in lagging regions. However the CoR points out that barriers to learning are an issue for socially excluded groups across the whole Union. The CoR stresses the important role that the European Social Fund plays within the framework of the European Employment Strategy in developing human capital of disadvantaged groups, wherever they reside within the Union.

3. Geographic mobility

The Committee of the Regions

1. **strongly agrees** with the Commission that geographic mobility should not be considered as an end in itself but should be considered as a real choice for individuals;
2. **believes** that an increase in geographic mobility should not be at the expense of the cohesion of the Union as a whole. The CoR believes that the European Commission should place greater emphasis on linking skills' development to the promotion of balanced regional development. Human-resource policies should be developed within the wider context of the Structural Funds and Community Initiatives;
3. **is of the view** that individuals often become geographically mobile through lack of real choice, which is often characterised by migration of unskilled workers from poorer to richer regions. It believes that whilst unskilled migrant workers can obtain entry-level employment, issues remain about their occupational mobility;
4. **stresses** that local and regional authorities, as the level of government closest to the people, play a key role in supporting the integration of migrant communities. It

considers that the impact of migration on local services such as housing, education, health and social services should be examined. It therefore calls on the Commission to conduct a survey with a view to disseminating good practice in schemes run by local bodies to facilitate and support mobility by providing special services for members of migrant communities;

5. **notes** that geographic mobility between Member States but also within Member States is low in the EU. The CoR would stress that barriers to geographic mobility within Member States remain important and the elimination of these barriers should be given equal priority to the removal of barriers between Member States;
6. **welcomes** the emphasis placed on removing remaining administrative and legal barriers in the Action Plan. Discrimination in access to employment, incompatibilities between tax, social security and public health systems and pensions of Member States all create barriers to mobility and the CoR welcomes moves to overcome them. To this end the Committee of the Regions reiterates the points made in the opinion on the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Directive on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. Eliminating these barriers to mobility does not, however, mean harmonisation of Members States' tax, social security, public health and pension systems;
7. **strongly welcomes** the proposal to undertake studies looking at the obstacles to mobility in the EU. Given the strategic role of local and regional authorities in economic development, the CoR calls for their involvement in framing these studies;
8. **acknowledges** that language and cultural barriers are significant in the EU compared with other similar economies and is of the view that the acquisition of language skills should begin early so that people grow up within the framework of a multilingual society;
9. **highlights** the importance of Community programmes such as Leonardo, Socrates and Youth in developing language and cross-cultural skills; and calls on the Commission to set up Community programmes for older people too, be they in employment or unemployed, or at risk of exclusion from the labour market, to help them retrain or find a new job;
10. **stresses** the important role that local and regional authorities play in encouraging cross-cultural exchange within the Union. The CoR welcomes the proposal for increased opportunities for exchanges for students and trainees. The CoR stresses that people from disadvantaged backgrounds face greater barriers to mobility and recommends that EU programmes facilitate their involvement. Given the proposals for increased mobility exchanges, the CoR urges a review of the budgetary resources available;
11. **notes** the call for a common immigration policy for third-country nationals and "agrees that there is an undoubted need today, and particularly in the future, for skilled and unskilled labour in the European Union" (Opinion of the CoR on the *Proposal for a Council Directive concerning the status of Third-Country nationals who are long-term residents* (CdR 213/2001 fin)).

4. **Improving information and transparency of job opportunities**

The Committee of the Regions

1. **welcomes** the setting-up of a one-stop European Mobility Information Site. The CoR would draw attention to the role of local and regional authorities in disseminating information directly to the citizen and is therefore of the view that local and regional authorities should be involved in any information activities and information campaigns. Local and regional authorities are often the first point of contact for information and it is vital that the potential to serve as a conduit for information is not disregarded. In particular local authorities are closest to the people and are therefore best able to access the socially excluded.

Brussels, 20 November 2002

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p.18

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CdR 138/2002 fin EN-IT/CAT/ss

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