

EDUC-011

Brussels, 14 May 2003

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of

10 April 2003

on the

Proposal for a European Parliament and Council decision establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural**understanding through cooperation with third countries****(Erasmus World) (2004- 2008)**

COM(2002) 401 final – 2002/0165 (COD)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council *establishing a programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008)* (COM (2002) 401 final) – 2002/0165 (COD);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the Council of 30 August 2002 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community,

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its President of 26 June 2002 to instruct the Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an Opinion on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 327/2002 rev. 2) adopted on 18 February 2003 by its Commission for Culture and Education (Rapporteur: **Mr Roberto Pella**, Mayor of Valdengo (I/EPP));

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 49th plenary session, held on 9-10 April 2003 (meeting of 10 April):

1. The Committee of the Regions' views

1. The Committee of the Regions is pleased to note that the Commission has accepted and fully applied the principle - with which the CoR fully agrees - contained in the report of the European Parliament on the *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening cooperation with third countries in the field of higher education*¹, in which the European Parliament "urges the Commission to make provision, in its programmes for reconstruction and development assistance, and in projects intended to support the transition towards market economies and strengthen democracy, for initiatives to enable third countries and EU Member States jointly to develop training programmes, student exchanges and scholarships, and vocational integration grants for those who intend to return to their country of origin as a means of brain-drain prevention".
2. The Committee endorses the draft decision of the European Parliament and of the Council presented by the Commission, particularly in view of the added value which Erasmus World can give to action at Community level to improve higher education; indeed, this would appear to be one of the fields where the Member States acting together can achieve more important objectives than if they acted separately.
3. As already stated in earlier opinions, the Committee takes the view that higher education has an important role to play in economic, social and cultural life at local and regional level. In the context of that role, it is necessary to establish strong links between higher education and the local and regional authorities.
4. Moreover, transnational mobility is an essential prerequisite for creating job opportunities and education and training possibilities, and is a fundamental requirement for European research.
5. The Committee agrees with the Commission that there is a need for a Community action programme, subject to Article 149 of the Treaty which limits Community action in the education sector to supporting and supplementing the action of Member States and prohibits legislative harmonisation.
6. It appreciates the precision with which the objectives of the Erasmus World programme are identified and the care taken to avoid overlapping measures, recognising that many subjects at the centre of the internationalisation of higher education can be better dealt with at national level, at intergovernmental level or in the context of existing Community actions and programmes.
7. However, the Committee of the Regions emphasises that, despite intergovernmental cooperation, some needs and gaps still exist, and these are effectively identified and highlighted by the Commission:
 - difficulties encountered by European universities in making the most of their comparative advantages to provide an original and attractive higher education offer, particularly at postgraduate level;

- the lack of a clearly distinguishable European identity in the higher education sector;
 - the absence of "flagship products" such as double degrees at postgraduate level, and the consequent need to create a Community label for high-quality postgraduate courses;
 - the growing imbalance in the influx of third-country students;
 - the general tendency among the brightest postgraduate students and scholars in search of international education to go to the United States;
 - the risk of a growing deficit in intercultural understanding between Europe and other cultures;
 - the insufficient development of structural schemes to encourage bridges between European networks and third countries' centres of excellence in the field of higher education and the outward mobility of students and scholars as part of a European *cursus*;
 - the absence of coordinated action at Community level to promote the attractiveness of Europe, and the lack of mechanisms to ensure international cooperation in terms of quality assurance and services for students.
8. The Committee of the Regions stresses in particular the problem of the imbalance in the distribution of the influx of students from third countries: more than three-quarters of the approximately 400,000 students from non-European countries who study in the Community go to the United Kingdom, France or Germany; this is one of the main defects of the current education programmes, which needs to be remedied as soon as possible because of its effects on local and regional authorities, some of which are burdened with the presence of too many foreign students, while others do not succeed in attracting them.
 9. The Committee is convinced that the Community action programme Erasmus World will bring about a redistribution of the influx of students from third countries, which will undoubtedly benefit local and regional authorities.
 10. The Committee is pleased that the Commission will seek, in the selection procedure for European Union Masters Courses, to ensure a geographically balanced representation of the Member States and will take due account of the existence of centres of university excellence in the most disadvantaged regions of the EU, with a view to strengthening the economic, social and cultural influence of the universities in such regions.

11. The Committee of the Regions points out that European Union Masters Courses must not lead to differentiation in European higher education. Rather, attention should be paid to enhancing the quality and attractiveness of higher education throughout the European Union.
 12. It urges the Commission to take particular care to avoid the Erasmus World programme being reduced by financial constraints to a programme reserved for the few, or aimed at people and institutions with the greatest economic resources, thereby jeopardising the principle of equal opportunities.
 13. The Committee also invites the Commission to provide effective operational instruments to avoid a situation in the funding of individual projects where minimum amounts are laid down in which are so high as to prevent access to Erasmus World for institutions and bodies with lesser funds that are often capable, unlike other bodies, of drawing up highly innovative projects.
 14. It fully agrees with the importance of the general aim of the Commission proposal, namely to contribute to high-quality education in the European Union, particularly by fostering cooperation with third countries.
 15. Cooperation with third countries in the field of education seems essential in order to prepare European citizens to live and work in a globalised society, based on knowledge, above all with a view to improving mutual understanding between peoples and cultures, as the Commission rightly emphasises, to contribute to world peace and stability.
 16. Indeed, as emphasised also by the European Parliament in the report quoted in point 1.1. above, "cooperation in the field of education favours good neighbourly relations and reciprocal understanding between peoples, which is the indispensable basis for the development of any civil society in today's multi-ethnic, inter-religious world".
 17. The Committee of the Regions believes that the Erasmus World programme is worthwhile and hopes that, in the long term, it will represent for Europe a real possibility of growth - in the same way that the Fulbright programme has brought and continues to bring benefits to the United States - in terms of improving the quality of higher education, stimulating European universities to develop ever better international services and improving intercultural dialogue; the Committee takes the view that it is an effective policy on higher education which has enabled the United States to act as host for a number of years now to a larger number of foreign students than in all the Member States of the European Union put together.
 18. It appreciates the special attention devoted by the Commission to tackling the so-called "brain drain" problem, by inviting the institutions taking part in European Union Masters Courses and the other host universities to ensure that their application and selection procedures avoid or discourage a "brain drain" from the less developed countries. The Committee of the Regions sees it as one of the main responsibilities of the European Union in relation to the poorest non-European countries to guarantee them development based on their own resources.
- 2. Assessment of the specific objectives of the action programme proposed by the Commission**
1. Among the specific objectives identified by the Commission, the local and regional authorities are particularly interested in that of giving a higher profile and greater visibility to European education as well as making it more accessible.

2. Indeed, the presence in the Member States of students from third countries involves local and regional authorities for two reasons.
3. Firstly, local and regional authorities are the only bodies capable of guaranteeing equality of access to services.
4. Secondly, local and regional authorities are directly involved in some of the activities defined by the Commission as activities complementary to the action programme, namely:

- changes in society and educational systems in global perspective;
- safety and health of students who avail themselves of the opportunities offered by the programme;
- aspects of consumer protection connected with international education.

2.5 The Committee of the Regions also fully endorses the other three specific objectives of the programme, namely:

- the emergence of a distinctly European offer in higher education which would be attractive both within the European Union and beyond its borders;
- greater worldwide interest in, and more concrete possibilities for acquiring, European qualifications and/or experience among highly-qualified graduates and scholars from all over the world;
- more structured cooperation between European Community and third-country institutions and greater outgoing European Union mobility as part of European study programmes.

3. Assessment of the operational objectives of the action programme proposed by the Commission

1. The Committee of the Regions endorses the reasons which led the Commission to concentrate on postgraduate education and place it at the centre of Community action.
2. It particularly appreciates the attention given to the problems which would arise from having to maintain significant numbers of students from third countries for a period of university study lasting between three and six years - problems which would affect local and regional authorities in particular.
3. In this context, the Committee of the Regions points out that in earlier opinions it had already asked the Commission to take appropriate measures to harmonise conditions of admission and residence for third-country nationals going to Europe to study, and it is pleased that the Commission has recently drawn up a draft directive on the subject, on which the Committee will give its opinion.

4. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

Recommendation 1

Preamble (6) *bis* (new)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
	This programme provides for the creation of EU masters degree courses which will enable students to carry out a tour of Europe in various university institutes. It therefore seems desirable to take account of this new European dimension of higher education in the current review of European programmes such as <i>Socrates</i> , in order to encourage European students' access to the <i>Erasmus World</i> programme.

Reason

The stronger the link with current Community programmes, the more effective the Erasmus World programme will be, always provided that the specific objectives of each are clearly distinguished.

Recommendation 2

Preamble (13)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
This programme should be regularly monitored and evaluated in cooperation between the Commission and the Member States in order to allow for readjustments, particularly in the priorities for implementing the measures; the evaluation should include an external evaluation to be conducted by independent, impartial bodies.	This programme should be regularly monitored and evaluated in cooperation between the Commission, the Member States and the local and regional authorities in order to allow for readjustments, particularly in the priorities for implementing the measures; the evaluation should include an external evaluation to be conducted by independent, impartial bodies.

Reason

Only the local and regional authorities, through the regional universities, are best placed to monitor the effectiveness of the programme in question in terms of implementation and participation, pointing out any practical difficulties encountered by students from third countries.

Recommendation 3

Article 1, paragraph 2 *bis* (new)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
	This programme will respect the powers of the European Union and the Member States in accordance with the distribution of powers and the administrative structure in each of the Member States, in line with the subsidiarity principle, in terms of education and training, especially as regards measures designed to preserve cultural and linguistic diversity.

Reason

As already happens in other Community programmes, it is necessary to preserve not only the Member States' powers in terms of education and training but also cultural and linguistic diversity – a rich heritage of European culture.

Recommendation 4

Article 4 (2) (a)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
(a) support for the development of joint educational programmes and cooperation networks facilitating the exchange of experience and good practice;	(a) support for the development of joint educational programmes, cooperation networks and pilot projects based on transnational partnerships – some of them already implemented by local and regional authorities - facilitating the exchange of experience and good practice;

Reason

It is important to make effective use of existing networks; in fact, for example, many industrial concerns based in the Member States have already activated – partly through bilateral agreements between Member States and third countries – effective forms of exchange in order to optimise vocational training in the post-university context; such networks are ideal channels for ensuring that the *Erasmus World* Community programme takes off more quickly.

Recommendation 5

Article 6, paragraph (2) *bis* (new)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
	The Commission, in cooperation with the Member States and the local and regional authorities, shall ensure that the actions

included in this programme receive sufficient information and publicity coverage.

Reason

The success of Erasmus is linked with the effectiveness of the information and publicity about it, designed to reach the largest possible number of interested parties, above all through the involvement of regional universities and local and regional authorities.

Recommendation 6

Article 8 (1)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
1. The Commission shall be assisted by a Committee composed of representatives of the Member States and chaired by the representative of the Commission.	1. The Commission shall be assisted by a Committee composed of representatives of the Member States and representatives of the local and regional authorities and chaired by the representative of the Commission.

Reason

&n bsp; An improvement in the quality of European higher education can be achieved only by directly involving regional universities, and hence by directly involving the local and regional authorities from the initial stages of the programme onwards.

Recommendation 7

Article 10 (1)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
1. The financial framework for the implementation of this programme for the period specified in Article 1 is hereby set at €200 million.	1. The financial framework for the implementation of this programme for the period specified in Article 1 is hereby set at €300 million.

Reason

The funding of €200 million is insufficient. In order to increase the possibilities for intercultural exchanges, it is essential to ensure that even students from third countries which are very distant from Europe will participate.

Recommendation 8

Article 13 (1)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
1. The Commission shall regularly monitor this programme in cooperation with the Member States. The results of the monitoring and evaluation process shall be utilised when implementing the programme.	1. The Commission shall regularly monitor this programme in cooperation with the Member States and the local and regional authorities. The results of the monitoring and evaluation process shall be utilised when implementing the programme.

Reason

Please refer to the reason given for Recommendation 2 above.

Recommendation 9**Annex, Action 1, paragraph 1**

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
1. The Community will identify and grant European postgraduate courses the label of "European Union Masters Courses" through a rigorous selection process as provided for in Article 7(1) and in accordance with the procedure set out in Article 8(2).	1. The Community <u>shall, through a rigorous selection process carried out by the competent bodies in the Member States, grant European postgraduate courses the designation of "Erasmus World Masters Courses".</u>

Reason

The label of "European Union Masters Courses" must be granted in cooperation with the universities and the local and regional authorities. Indeed, the universities can guarantee the assessment of the quality of the courses offered, and the local and regional authorities can concern themselves with the reception of students and then assess its effectiveness.

Recommendation 10**Annex, Action 1, paragraph 2 (a)**

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
a) involve a minimum of three higher education institutions from three different Member States;	a) involve a minimum of three higher education institutions from two different Member States;

Reason

The aim of the *Erasmus World* programme is to encourage intercultural understanding while improving the quality of higher education. In order to give students from third countries an opportunity to get to know the culture of the host country, it seems desirable to limit to two the number of Member States involved, and hence to increase from 9 months to one year the period of residence in each Member State.

Recommendation 11

Annex, Action 1, paragraph 2 (b)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
b) implement a study programme which involves a period of study in at least two of the three institutions under (a);	b) implement a study programme which involves a period of study in at least two of the three institutions under (a), and the study of at least two languages used in the Member States, with reference to minority languages;

Reason

One of the basic means of getting to know a country's culture is the language used there, and particularly the minority languages, which are fundamental factors for cultural richness and variety.

Recommendation 12

Annex, Action 1, paragraph 2 (h)

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
h) put in place adequate arrangements to facilitate access for, and hosting of, third-country students (information facilities, accommodation etc.);	h) put in place adequate arrangements to facilitate access for, and hosting of, third-country students (information facilities, accommodation etc.) in cooperation with the local and regional authorities;

Reason

Here too it seems essential to stress the importance of the quality of the systems adopted, and above all the fundamental role of the local and regional authorities in ensuring proper hosting of the students. It is necessary to provide effective operational instruments for consultation of the local and regional authorities, in order to tackle in the simplest and most efficient way practical problems such as that of the students' accommodation, with a view to facilitating access to European Union Masters Courses.

Recommendation 13

Annex, Action 1, paragraph 2 (i)

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Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
i) provide, as appropriate, for students' language preparation and assistance.	i) provide, as appropriate, for students' language preparation and assistance, with a view to the objective in point (b) – the knowledge of at least two languages used in the Member States, with reference to minority languages.

Reason

Please refer to the reason given for Recommendation 11 above.

Recommendation 14

Annex, Action 3, paragraph 3 *bis* (new)

Text of the Commission proposal	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
	3 <i>bis</i> . Where possible, the Community will make use of existing networks and partnerships already set up by local and regional authorities with third countries to improve higher education.

Reason

Please refer to the reason given for Recommendation 4 above.

Recommendation 15

Annex, Action 4, paragraph 4.1, point 2, first indent

Text proposed by the Commission	Amendment by the Committee of the Regions
— development of general written or visual common information and dissemination tools contributing towards a better understanding of the value of study in Europe;	— development of general written or visual common information and dissemination tools contributing towards a better understanding of the value of study in Europe; creation of an Internet site to facilitate access to the EU Masters Courses and other European courses;

Reason

The Internet is undoubtedly the most effective information tool for reaching all the potential beneficiaries of the Erasmus World programme. Moreover, entrusting the information function

mainly to the Internet site would make it possible to devote more funds to financing student mobility.

Brussels, 10 April 2003.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ COM(2001) 385 – C5 – 0538/2001 – 2001/2217(COS)

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