

EDUC-013

Brussels, 14 May 2003

**OPINION**

of the

Committee of the Regions  
of  
10 April 2003on the  
Communication from the Commission on**European benchmarks in education and training: follow up to the Lisbon European Council**

COM(2002) 629 final

## THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission on *European benchmarks in education and training: follow up to the Lisbon European Council*;

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 20 November 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 5 August 2002 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to its Opinion on the Report from the Commission on *Concrete Future objectives of Education systems* (CdR 89/2001 fin)<sup>1</sup>;

Having regard to its Opinion on the *Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education* (CdR 21/2000 fin)<sup>2</sup>;

Having regard to:

- its Opinion on *The White Paper on Education and Training -Teaching and learning towards the learning society* (CdR 115/1996 fin)<sup>3</sup>;
- its Opinion on the *Communication from the Commission "Towards a Community framework Strategy on gender equality"* (CdR 233/2000 fin)<sup>4</sup>;
- its Opinion on the *Commission Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (CdR 19/2001 fin)<sup>5</sup>;
- its Opinion on the *Communication on the eLearning Action Plan – Designing tomorrow's education* (CdR 212/2001 fin)<sup>6</sup>;
- its Opinion on the *Communication from the Commission "Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality"* (CdR 49/2002 fin)<sup>7</sup>;

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 349/2002 rev. 1) adopted on 18 February 2003 by its Commission for Culture and Education (rapporteur: **Mr Lars Abel**, Member of Copenhagen County Council (DK/EPP),

Whereas:

1) Article 149 of the EC Treaty states that the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States, and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity. There is therefore no question of any form of standardisation of national laws or administrative provisions.

2) Cooperation between Member States in the field of education is an important contribution towards achieving the goals of the Lisbon European Council in creating a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society.

3) The Committee of the Regions supports the overall aim of the Communication, but stresses the need for regional and local authorities to be involved in the benchmarking process as they hold prime responsibility in the field of education in the implementation phase. It also feels that, in setting the concrete benchmarks, the European Commission has not taken sufficient account of each individual country's starting point which, according to the Lisbon presidency conclusions, is essential when using the open method of coordination.

**Unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 49<sup>th</sup> plenary session, held on 9-10 April 2003 (meeting of 10 April).**

#### **1. The Committee of the Regions' views**

#### **The Committee of the Regions**

1. **endorses** the Commission's overall aim in the Communication of formulating concrete objectives for the field of education, which is an essential requirement for achieving the Lisbon objectives, and approves of the ambitiousness of the Commission's formulations. At the same time, however, it calls for consideration to be given to how the Commission document can make a positive contribution to the ongoing education policy debate;

2. **feels** that one step in this process is to formulate concrete benchmarks, but draws attention to the fact that the formulation of such benchmarks must also take account of each individual country's starting point with respect to the use of the open method of coordination;
3. **stresses** that local and regional authorities are key players in implementing the processes that are set in motion in order to achieve the benchmarks set, and
4. **calls on** the Commission to support the development of networks for the exchange of experience and dissemination of best practice, which is an important element in the open method of coordination;
5. **calls on** the Commission to recommend to the individual Member States that local and regional authorities be involved in work to organise implementation of these benchmarks.
6. **recognises** that increasing expenditure may improve the chances of achieving the benchmarks set in some countries, but that increasing expenditure will not guarantee this by itself;
7. **points out** that the prerequisite for achieving the chosen benchmarks is that educators have the necessary specialist and teaching qualifications;
8. **welcomes** the Commission's proposal to set national benchmarks on the increase in per capita investment in human resources, as the CoR would stress that, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, it is up to the competent national, regional and local authorities to set the amount of public expenditure on the various forms of education;
9. **calls on** the Commission to ensure the collection of data to determine both the starting point and development at national, regional and local level in the Member States;
10. **stresses** that it is extremely important for this process to be opened up to the accession countries and calls on the Commission to take steps to enable the accession countries to be attentive to these benchmarks on a voluntary basis.

## 2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations

**By 2010, Member States should at least halve the rate of early school leavers with reference to the rate recorded in the year 2000, in order to achieve an EU-average rate of 10% or less.**

1. **notes** that the Commission is proposing that, irrespective of the large disparities between Member States which range from 7.7% to 43.1%, all Member States should halve the percentage of pupils leaving school before having completed compulsory education;
2. **recommends** that this benchmark is modified so as to recognise the fact that those countries which are already close to achieving the target of a 10% EU average must aim to reach this level;
3. **points out** that countries that are significantly above the 10% target will have difficulty achieving the benchmark set by 2010 as to do so will presumably require a major expansion of their education systems.

**By 2010, all Member States will have at least halved the level of gender imbalance among graduates in mathematics, science and technology while securing an overall significant increase of the total number of graduates, compared to the year 2000.**

4. **recognises** that there is a problem of major gender imbalance in these subjects (cf. the CoR opinion on the *Communication from the Commission "Towards a Community framework Strategy on gender equality"*, CdR 233/2000 *rapporteur: Bunyan* and the CoR opinion on the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, CdR 19/2001, *rapporteur: Tallberg*) but feels that the current shortage of graduates in these subjects implies that an equally important objective must be to increase the total number of graduates;
5. **proposes** that the benchmark be modified so as to require all Member States to ensure a significant increase in the total number of graduates compared to the year 2000, while working towards a gender balance where female graduates account for a minimum of 40%.

**By 2010, Member States should ensure that the EU average percentage of 25-64 year olds with at least upper secondary education reaches 80% or more.**

6. **welcomes** this proposed benchmark which will improve the Member States' citizens' chances of finding employment in the job market, thereby promoting active citizenship;
7. **emphasises** the importance of focusing in particular on the younger generation, on keeping young people in the education system and developing an appreciation of the link between education and employment opportunities as strengthening basic skills increases readiness to undertake life-long learning.
8. **believes** that achieving the objective of raising the EU average proportion of 25-64 year olds with at least upper secondary education to 80% or more will involve specific national programmes in the context of continuous training strategies

**By 2010, the percentage of low-achieving 15 year olds in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy will be at least halved in each Member State, compared to the year 2000.**

9. **recommends** that, in addition to the goal of halving the percentage of low-achievers, a more specific, joint European target should also be established that can supplement this goal in Member States where the percentage of low-achievers in reading, writing and mathematical and scientific literacy is very low;
10. **recognises** the importance of reading, writing, mathematics and science skills, but points out that knowledge of ICT and foreign languages are important for getting along in a knowledge-based society, and that ICT and foreign languages are also important tools for acquiring knowledge, communicating and problem-solving, and thus for achieving the objectives on continuing education and lifelong learning;
11. **emphasises** the major importance of teaching children ICT skills at an early age by using teaching tools appropriate to that age group;

12. **calls on** the Commission, with reference to the CoR opinion on the Report from the Commission on *Concrete Future objectives of Education, CdR 89/2001, rapporteur: O'Neachtain*, to continue its efforts to gather adequate and reliable data on performance in ICT teaching and the use of ICT in education;
13. **stresses** that efforts to boost reading, writing, mathematics, science and ICT must not be at the expense of other subjects in the school or at the expense of developing qualities like creativity, self-respect, social skills, solidarity and democratic attitudes, which are very important, especially in a knowledge-based society. For this reason it would be better to adopt an across-the-board approach, in all areas of the curriculum, to improving the aforementioned disciplines, especially reading and writing, so that other subjects do not suffer.

**By 2010, the EU-average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 15% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group) and in no country should it be lower than 10%.**

14. **welcomes** this proposed benchmark and recognizes that it is a prerequisite if the EU is to continue to be able to adapt to the demands of the knowledge-based society and if citizens are going to be able to hold on to and improve their jobs in the labour market, by responding to its demands more appropriately;
15. **points out** that the necessary resources must come from both public and private sources, and that training and learning processes can take various forms and take place in various contexts (such as interactive, net-based courses, coaching or quality development projects within companies) and that this should be borne in mind when determining the methods of measurement.
16. **notes**, lastly, the need to provide for the certification of skills acquired, in order to encourage the participation of adults in lifelong learning, especially those of working age.

Brussels, 10 April 2003.

The President  
of the  
Committee of the Regions

The Secretary-General  
of the  
Committee of the Regions

**Albert Bore**

**Vincenzo Falcone**

<sup>1</sup> OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 23

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 317, 6.11.2000, p. 56

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 182, 24.6.1996, p. 15

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p. 47

<sup>5</sup> OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 36

<sup>6</sup> OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 26

<sup>7</sup> OJ C 278, 14.11.2002, p. 26

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CdR 349/2002 fin EN-DA/JP/JW/nm .../...

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