

EDUC 004

Brussels, 31 May 2002

**OPINION**

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 15 May 2002

on the

**Communication from the Commission –**

**Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality**

(COM(2001) 678 final)

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**The Committee of the Regions**

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Communication from the Commission - Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality COM(2001) 678 final;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the European Commission Decision of 22 November 2001 to consult it under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Decision taken by its Bureau on 6 February 2002 to instruct Commission – Culture and Education – to draw up an opinion on this subject;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Commission's memorandum (SEC(2000) 1832);

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Committee of the Regions Opinion on that memorandum (CdR 19/2001 fin)<sup>1</sup>;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the presidency conclusions of the summits in Lisbon 23-24 March 2000, Feira 19-20 June 2000 and Stockholm 23-24 March 2001;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Commission's 1995 White Paper (COM(95) 590 final) and the Commission's Communication (COM(1997) 563 final);

**HAVING REGARD TO** the Committee of the Regions Opinion (CdR 244/1994 fin)<sup>2</sup> on the proposal for a decision establishing 1996 as the European Year for Lifelong Learning;

**HAVING REGARD TO** e-learning: the Commission Communication (COM(2000) 318 final) and the Committee of the Regions Opinion (CdR 212/2001 fin)<sup>3</sup>;

**HAVING REGARD TO** education systems: the Commission report on the concrete future objectives of education systems (COM(2001) 59 final) and the Committee of the Regions Opinion (CdR 89/2001 fin)<sup>4</sup>;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the sixth framework programme: the Commission report (COM(2001) 94 final) and the Committee of the Regions Opinion (CdR 283/2001 fin);

**HAVING REGARD TO** the European agreement concluded between ETUC, UNICE and CEEP on an action plan for vocational training as part of lifelong learning;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the presidency conclusions of the European Council meeting held in Barcelona on 15-16 March 2002;

**HAVING REGARD TO** the draft Opinion (CdR 49/2002 rev. 1) adopted by Commission – Culture and Education – on 22 March 2002 (rapporteur: **Mrs Christina Tallberg**, 1<sup>st</sup> vice-chairman of Stockholm county council (S/PES));

**adopted the following opinion at its 44<sup>th</sup> plenary session on 15/16 May 2002 (meeting of 15 May).**

#### **The Committee of the Regions' views and recommendations**

1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the Commission communication "*Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*" as a further milestone in developing this European area.
2. The CoR agrees with the Commission's view that this process is not new and there is no intention to harmonise legislation or other provisions.
3. The CoR notes with satisfaction that the Commission views it as a major partner in cooperation, as reflected for instance in the Commission's update of specific tasks for the CoR.
4. The CoR observes that the broad definition on which the concept of lifelong learning is based has met with widespread approval in the consultation processes. The CoR welcomes this approach to learning from earliest childhood all through life and the fact that the lifelong learning dimension takes account of formal, non-formal and informal learning.
5. One important area of action is to promote participation in society, active citizenship and

awareness of our individual rights and duties as members of society. It is important not to create further gaps but to give everyone an opportunity to participate actively in working life and as a member of the community. The wide variety of problems with which people with disabilities and other vulnerable persons have to contend require individual solutions, easy access and a well-developed infrastructure to satisfy differing needs.

6. The CoR would stress that the strategy for lifelong learning concerns the local and the regional level closely as it often shoulders political and economic responsibility for the education and training sector in the Member States. Frequently local and regional authorities act, alongside the social authorities, as coordinator for development and growth with responsibility for public welfare and infrastructure. They also exercise the role of employer, and are responsible for, as well as having an interest in, upgrading the skills of their workforce. However, the CoR considers that the Communication does not properly recognise the fundamental role played by regional and local authorities in designing and implementing strategies for lifelong learning and local learning partnerships.

7. The Committee of the Regions has taken note of the European agreement on an action plan for vocational training as part of lifelong learning, which was recently concluded between ETUC, UNICE and CEEP. The approach which characterises the agreement is in line with what the CoR is now advocating. The CoR plays a part in this action plan through the cooperation of the CEEP.

8. The CoR welcomes the Commission's recommendation that consultation networks on lifelong learning should be built on at all levels (national, regional and local) to support implementation. It regrets, however, that the Communication does not specifically mention regional and local authorities when it states that Member States, the European Economic Area and candidate countries should prolong, strengthen and expand established interministerial coordination structures to promote internal policy coherence.

9. The CoR endorses the communication's structure, including "coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies", "priorities for action" and "driving forward the agenda". However, strategies at European, national and regional/local level must be conducted in tandem and an outdated "top-down" hierarchical approach to implementation must be avoided. Greater account now needs to be taken of the key role that local and regional authorities will play in the future development of a European area of lifelong learning.

10. The CoR is pleased to note that one of the cornerstones of the Commission's strategy is the building up of partnerships at local level, to include local authorities, schools, universities, further education institutions and other education service providers, the business sector, employment offices and local associations. This will result in new forms of networking. Contacts between schools and the workplace can profitably be extended to encompass other forms than traditional study visits and traineeships. Especially as businesses in the new knowledge-based economy are keen to stimulate curiosity, entrepreneurship and an overall view in pupils rather than the narrow application of unconnected elements. Students can also contribute by bringing their knowhow into businesses. However, the CoR believes that partnerships at regional level are also essential and should be specifically mentioned in the Communication.

11. The CoR considers that partnerships can help foster a new, more open learning environment in schools and businesses. Schoolwork will less and less be a closed activity targeted solely on full-time students. Instead it will operate in closer contact with local businesses. The learning environment will also change as a result of greater emphasis on virtual input. In addition, the role of libraries in providing open learning environments for all members of society should be supported.

12. The new, more open learning environment that will be typical of the school of the future requires support for teacher training and in-service training and local learning centres so as to develop the teacher's role. The CoR welcomes the Commission's proposal for targeted support measures for such action – for instance, channelled through the European Investment Bank. To cope successfully with the teaching role in lifelong learning, it is also necessary to encourage teachers to feel constantly responsible for their own development.

13. The CoR would stress that the new vision and approach focusing on learning in a variety of forms – as opposed to instruction – will make demands on colleges, further education institutions and research institutions in the shape of education and research in lifelong learning.

14. Learning requirements can be ascertained in different ways on the basis of the views expressed by individuals, groups, the workplace and civil society organizations. In a knowledge-based Europe this debate on educational needs will have to be conducted on a local and regional basis.

15. The CoR would also stress the importance of pursuing a forward-looking discussion taking heed of the messages emitted locally/regionally by society, by the workplace and different businesses, varying from innovative and more growth-oriented sectors with modern working structures to more traditional firms/sectors whose working methods have not changed.

16. Alongside what are more traditionally considered to be basic skills, the CoR would highlight a number of other aspects, such as understanding, respect and empathy for our fellow citizens, regardless of ethnical background, language or religion, combined with an appreciation of the value of Europe's linguistic, cultural and natural diversity.

17. Some other major skills in meeting the challenges of today are:

- an overview of one's own learning,
- the capacity to operate and work together with others,
- the capacity to understand different viewpoints,
- the capacity to deal with complex issues and a flood of information
- the capacity to present oneself, speak in public and express viewpoints.

18. The CoR shares the Commission's view that increased investment in education must fit into strategies framed at local level. It also insists that investment in education must take account of strategies at regional level. A debate is needed on the respective responsibility of society and entrepreneurs for education.

19. The CoR considers that special support must be made available for accessing various forms of "second chance" educational opportunities. Increasingly demand is focused on education or training at college or post-secondary level. Hence those who so wish must have access to education at this level without being held back by geographical, social, private finance or other obstacles.

20. Further, local/regional authorities and other players must be equipped to operate and develop local lifelong learning facilities at times, in places and at a pace which suit different individuals. Information and communication technologies continue to gain ground and to create new, flexible learning opportunities which are quite different from more traditional distance education. It is also important to enable those who so need or wish to move ahead in the company of others, to the potential benefit of both the learning process and social harmony.

21. The CoR agrees on the need to develop a positive learning culture. As the platform for lifelong and life-wide learning, perhaps the most important task of primary and secondary schools and adult education institutions is constantly to stimulate curiosity and the desire to learn. Particular emphasis must be placed on encouraging persons who have less positive memories of their schooldays or who are otherwise lacking in motivation. In particular, it is important to improve the learning opportunities for young school drop-outs and immigrants so as to provide them with the prerequisites necessary for lifelong learning.

22. In future a major feature of local and regional lifelong learning infrastructure will be the evaluation of knowledge and skills – regardless of whether they have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning. The CoR would stress the importance of steering clear of complicated technical assessment systems or systems where individuals are regarded as objects rather than being given the support they need to get their skills recognised and documented. Such systems can be expected to frighten people off and prove counterproductive. It is therefore necessary to see the individual as an information carrier. The CoR urges that it be involved in continued efforts in this area of action. The Central European Language Portfolio, already in use in many countries, is an example of this.

23. The CoR would like to stress that it must be allowed to play an active role in promoting lifelong learning at local and regional level. The prospects for developing existing town twinning system schemes and fostering new contacts are favourable. By making full use of new information and communication technologies, further opportunities will be created for building bridges between different forms of learning in different parts of Europe. The CoR looks forward to working with the Commission to find new innovatory ways of identifying best practice in lifelong learning at local and regional level.

24. The CoR welcomes the Commission's resolve to provide support in different forms for the networking of regions and cities with successful lifelong learning strategies. It is keen to cooperate in such action with a view to building on experiences and good practice.

25. The Commission announces the framing of European recommendations regarding quality evaluation in education. In the CoR's view, it is important for such tools to be developed to support various players in their drive for constant improvement in meeting fixed targets, expectations and demands - but not as a central system of checks based on rigid routines.

26. The CoR welcomes the development of a limited number of indicators but feels that it is vital to draw on the lessons learned in the context of the OECD's work. The CoR would willingly participate in this process.

27. The CoR feels that one prerequisite for maintaining the momentum of a lifelong learning process is to involve the local and regional level throughout the EU in lively dialogue and discussion of programmes of action. The Committee suggests that there should be a substantial number of local and regional representatives on any planned or possible future bodies, in order to ensure that consultation and formulation of proposals with respect to lifelong learning are of the highest quality.

28. Future efforts to make lifelong learning a reality must involve the CoR, as the representative of the local and regional level in Europe. The Commission's communication has specified a large number of practical tasks. It is important for these to be regularly updated with the CoR. This could be done – as we have already pointed out in our Opinion on the Commission's memorandum on lifelong learning – through a Commission-CoR joint committee.

Brussels, 15 May 2002

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

**Albert Bore**

**Vincenzo Falcone**

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 36

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 210, 14.8.1995, p. 74

<sup>3</sup> OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 26

<sup>4</sup> OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 23

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