

*European Economic and Social Committee*

**SOC/123**

**eLearning Programme**

Brussels, 26 March 2003

**OPINION**

of the European Economic and Social Committee

on the

**Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council adopting a multiannual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme)**

COM(2002) 751 final

On 19 December 2002 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council adopting a multiannual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme)*

(COM(2002) 751 final).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 4 March 2003. The rapporteur was **Mr Rodríguez García Caro**.

At its 398<sup>th</sup> plenary session on 26/27 March 2003 (meeting of 26 March 2003), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 98 votes in favour, no votes against and no abstentions.

## **1. Introduction**

1. The conclusions of the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 included the need for European education and training systems to be adapted to the needs of the knowledge economy, and declared information technologies to be one of the basic components of this new approach.
2. In these conclusions, the Member States were also urged to ensure that this new economy did not compound, inter alia, problems of social exclusion, and called for the promotion of digital literacy.
3. eLearning is the educational component of the Action Plan eEurope 2002<sup>1</sup>, which develops the Lisbon strategy. Its targets include connecting schools to the Internet and training as many teachers as possible in these technologies. The Action Plan eEurope 2005<sup>2</sup> includes eLearning as one of the most important measures.
4. The eLearning Action Plan<sup>3</sup> developed the four action lines of the eLearning initiative in ten key actions in order to achieve greater coherence and synergy between the various Community programmes and instruments, and thereby facilitate access for citizens.
5. In its resolutions on these Communications, the European Parliament recognised that this initiative was helping to strengthen the single European educational area, and called for it to be developed under a specific programme so as to avoid duplication with existing programmes.
6. Under Articles 149(4) and 150(4) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, the European Commission is submitting this Proposal for a Decision to the European Economic and Social Committee for an Opinion.

## **2. Gist of the proposal**

1. The general objective of the Proposal for a Decision is to promote and facilitate the use of information and communication technologies in European education and training systems, as an essential element of their adaptation to

the needs of the knowledge society and of the European model of social cohesion.

2. The implementation period will be from 1 January 2004 to 31 December 2006.

3. The objectives will be pursued in the following areas:

- fighting the digital divide, which can affect people who – owing to their geographical location, social situation or special needs - are not able to access traditional educational and training provisions;
- European virtual campuses, to encourage new organisational models for universities, building on existing co-operation frameworks;
- e-twinning European schools, to strengthen and develop schools networking that makes it possible for all European schools to build pedagogical partnerships with a school elsewhere in Europe;
- transversal actions, to promote e-learning in Europe and foster public-private partnerships.

4. The financial framework for the implementation of the programme is €36 million, to be distributed as follows:

- 25% for e-learning for fighting the digital divide;
- 30% for virtual campuses;
- 25% for e-twinning schools;
- 10% for transversal actions and monitoring of e-learning;
- 10% for technical and administrative assistance.

### 3. **General comments**

1. As the Committee pointed out in its opinion on *The European dimension of education: its nature, content and prospects*<sup>4</sup>, education is above all a process based primarily on the values of humanism. Any education planning option must be compatible with these values.

2. The Committee welcomes the proposed Decision, which has been referred for consultation. Notwithstanding the comments and recommendations made in this opinion, we consider this initiative to be extremely positive.

3. In addition to the comments made in this document, and with specific regard to the eLearning programme, the Committee reiterates the comments and recommendations made in its opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament entitled *The eLearning Action Plan - Designing tomorrow's education*<sup>5</sup>.
  1. The Committee considers the eLearning sector to be particularly strategic in building the Europe of tomorrow. Given the complementary nature of the new programme, and its extremely limited budget, the Committee recommends that other Community instruments should continue to be used in this area.
  2. Moreover, the Committee considers that the amounts that have been allocated to help the programme meet its very ambitious objectives are extremely insufficient. The Committee therefore calls for a significant increase in funding for the programme. It also recommends that it focus on two areas:
    - fighting the digital divide,
    - school twinning via the Internet.
4. For education to have a truly European dimension, account must be taken of the many different education systems found in Europe. For this reason, we welcome the genuine involvement of the EFTA states and candidate countries in the programme. The many cultures and languages, as well as the differences existing between the various countries, lend an unsurpassable richness to the European education system as a whole.
5. To meet the objectives of the eLearning programme, and before we can aspire to the general use of new Information and Communication Technologies (hereinafter ICT), the barriers that exist – or may exist – to ICT access need to be overcome.
  1. Both in the area of infrastructures and equipment, and the use of new products, services and content, existing difficulties reinforce the barriers between those who can use ICT, and those who lack the necessary means and resources to do so.
  2. The European Union in general and the Member States in particular must continue their efforts to ensure that all EU citizens can access ICT under equal and fair conditions.
6. The Committee welcomes the fact that the proposed Decision presents a specific action plan with its own budget, but stresses the need to prevent actions overlapping with existing programmes. The coordination, cooperation and information measures contained in the proposed Decision must help meet this objective. Creating synergies between the different programmes will help enhance the new actions proposed under the eLearning programme.

1. In its opinion<sup>6</sup> on the Proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing the second phase of the Community action programme in the field of education "Socrates"<sup>7</sup>, the Committee called for increased coordination and cooperation between the different programmes to ensure that measures and related resources are applied efficiently.
7. In its opinion on the Communication from the Commission: Review of reactions to the White Paper "Teaching and learning: towards the learning society"<sup>8</sup>, the Committee highlighted the need to use specifically European educational multimedia, and train educators so that they can use them and teach other people how to use them. Socrates was already a step in this direction, which must be broadly reinforced and fleshed out through the instruments made available to EU citizens under the eLearning programme.
8. This new programme must make a considerable effort to foster any actions that help prevent discrimination against groups who find it particularly difficult to use ICT. The Committee therefore urges the Commission and the Member States to do their utmost to prevent the exclusion of the most underprivileged groups, in general, and the disabled, in particular<sup>9</sup>.
9. Promoting the use of ICT in education and training systems in Europe will not on its own necessarily guarantee high-quality education, but must be accompanied by the introduction of overall quality management systems based on the quest for excellence. ICT are just another tool in the process of ongoing quality improvement. If the quality of teaching is unacceptable, the introduction of new technologies will simply increase the dissemination of and access to low-quality education. ICT improve access to education and training systems, but do not guarantee per se an improvement in the quality of education and training.
10. Access via ICT to new learning and training possibilities and methods may change the teaching models with which we are familiar. Open and distance learning may improve and become widespread through these initiatives. Any measure that brings education and training closer to citizens must be welcomed and backed by all EU institutions and the Member States.
11. Strengthening the European dimension of education is an objective that affects all EU institutions. The fact that such technology enables information to be received and knowledge to be jointly acquired, thereby facilitating its transmission, is a key factor in reinforcing a European area of education and training that, while recognising cultural diversity, overcomes barriers and distances, and brings cultures and languages together<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4. Specific comments

1. The Committee fully shares the objectives of the eLearning Programme, as a specific programme dedicated to e-learning. However, it considers that both its meagre financial resources and the dispersion of its actions over a wide area will make it difficult to achieve these objectives.

1. In a Europe that attracts an ever-greater number of immigrants from very different cultures, it is essential that we use all the means available to encourage closer relations and understanding between different cultures. Accordingly, the Committee calls on the EU as a whole and Member States in particular to make the greatest possible effort to achieve this.
2. Likewise, the Committee is convinced that ICT are extremely useful in improving lifelong learning. In a world that is undergoing rapid and constant change, new ways of keeping people's qualifications and training up to date need to be found, so that they can maintain and improve the knowledge and skills required by the labour market. The Committee believes that, by ensuring that their human assets are always up to date, companies can become more competitive. It therefore welcomes initiatives that are a step forward in improving EU citizens' access to ongoing training.
3. Improvements to the quality of products, content and services proposed by new ICT must be underpinned by an environment that is favourable for European companies in the sector. Steps must be taken to ensure that such products and their content are designed with European needs in mind. In addition to the potential benefits in terms of employment in the EU, support for these companies should also lead to the creation of products and services that take account of the multifocal cultural reality in which we live.
4. The exclusion of certain groups – whether for geographical, social, gender-related, age-related or any other reasons – is one of the greatest threats to the dissemination and use of ICT. Any actions developed to prevent such exclusion must be fostered and supported.
  1. If nothing is done to put an end to the various means of exclusion that exist, other developments relating to eLearning may be affected. The Committee therefore believes that the percentage of funds earmarked for "fighting the digital divide" should be significantly increased, as a strategy to offer as many citizens as possible access to eLearning.
5. The virtual university could be seen as a more advanced and interactive system of the open university. This model, which is already being developed by a number of further education establishments in Europe, must provide special courses for those people who, owing to very different circumstances, are unable – or unwilling – to follow learning and training through traditional systems.
  1. The Committee welcomes wholeheartedly this type of initiative and stresses the need to improve and reduce the cost of Internet access for EU citizens, so that the development of this model of university organisation is not hindered. Such developments also allow for very close cooperation between further education establishments in the various Member States, thereby making education in Europe more of a force for integration.

2. Activities developed as part of the Socrates/Erasmus programme and its offshoot, Erasmus World<sup>11</sup>, can be carried out through these virtual campuses, thereby improving cooperation between establishments and the virtual mobility of teachers and pupils through the Internet.
3. However, the Committee believes that the development of these new organisational models for teaching must by no means put an end to traditional forms of learning through physical attendance, mobility and direct contact between teachers and pupils. In particular, physical attendance can help young people get more out of these new tools through contact with their teachers. The virtual university must be seen as additional support in certain circumstances and for certain people, but must not become an independent form - or indeed the only form - of teaching and learning.
6. Inter-school cooperation via the Internet must be a key element of knowledge and communication in coming years. Facilitating such communication between school children in Europe will in the medium term increase understanding of customs and cultures in the EU. The younger people are when they have such access, the easier it will be to foster understanding between people later in life.
  1. In the Committee's view, the best way to develop closer relations and inter-school cooperation could be to use these resources to improve school children's access to and knowledge of the various languages in Europe. Language courses run by native teachers could therefore be set up in schools as a kind of exchange that would increase students' knowledge of the language and culture of those participating in school networks.
7. The Committee therefore recommends extending school twinning via the Internet to pre-secondary levels from the outset, in the conviction that the younger the beneficiaries of these initiatives are, the easier it will be for them to adapt. A similar process occurs when language learning begins at an early age.
8. The Committee calls for greater use to be made of the Internet in disseminating Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity, and rejects the temptation to use only one vehicular language to circulate information and knowledge.
9. The Committee shares and welcomes the programme's objective of improving cooperation between the public and private sectors. Companies can contribute their experience in these developments and can in turn directly receive the information they need to provide products and services tailored to a changing situation.
10. Internal communication and coordination between the Commission's own services is essential to ensuring that the different committees for the various Community programmes in the fields of education, training, research, social policy and regional development have specific knowledge of the actions

undertaken, in order to prevent overlap or projects that are presented and developed receiving support from two or more programmes simultaneously.

1. The Committee urges the Commission to improve communication and coordination in order to develop this programme more effectively and efficiently.
11. The Committee welcomes this specific Programme, but not its budget allocation. It therefore believes that greater efforts should be made to boost the funding.
  12. The series of assessments planned – which correlate with similar actions envisaged under other programmes with similar objectives - should provide a basis for studying whether to bring together under a single programme the various lines of action designed to promote the dissemination and use of ICT in the field of education and training in Europe.
    1. In order to use available resources more effectively and more efficiently, the Committee believes it is necessary to carry out such an analysis and then come up with a proposal setting out a single programme, in order to maximise resources and minimise the cost of distributing actions among the various programmes.

Brussels, 26 March 2003.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

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**Roger Briesch**

**Patrick Venturini**

<sup>1</sup> See the Action Plan eEurope 2002 - An information society for all - COM(2000) 330 final

<sup>2</sup> See the Action Plan eEurope 2005 - An information society for all - COM(2002) 263 final

<sup>3</sup> See the Commission Communication – eLearning - Designing tomorrow's education – COM(2000) 318 final

<sup>4</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 139 of 11 May 2001, point 2.4.1.1 (rapporteur: **Mr Koryfidis**)

<sup>5</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 36 of 8 February 2002 (rapporteur: **Mr Rupp**; co-rapporteur: **Mr Koryfidis**)

<sup>6</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 410 of 30 December 1998 (rapporteur: **Mr Rodríguez García Caro**)

<sup>7</sup> See OJ L 28 of 3 February 2000

<sup>8</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 95 of 30 March 1998 (rapporteur: **Mr Koryfidis**)

<sup>9</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 94 of 18 April 2002 (rapporteur: **Mr Cabra de Luna**)

<sup>10</sup> See EESC opinion, OJ C 139 of 11 May 2001, point 2.5 (rapporteur: **Mr Koryfidis**).

<sup>11</sup> See 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 co-operation with third countries (Erasmus World) (2004-2008); (COM (2002) 401 final), and the EESC opinion on this subject (rapporteur: **Mr Rodríguez García Caro**)

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