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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL

ON USING THE INTERNET TO DEVELOP TWINNING BETWEEN EUROPEAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Introduction

The European Council meeting in Barcelona on 15 and 16 March 2002 called on the Commission to "*undertake a feasibility study to identify options for helping secondary schools to establish or enhance an Internet twinning link with a partner school elsewhere in Europe, and report back to the Seville European Council in June*".

This report sets out the approach to implementing this Internet twinning project which fits in with the process defined at the Lisbon European Council of 23 and 24 March 2000 for meeting the challenges posed by the new economy and turning the Union into the most competitive and most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

The Commission welcomes this project with interest, since it could be a major catalyst in intensifying the cooperation already under way among schools. It believes that at the end of 2006 all secondary schools in Europe should be in a position to twin up and work on joint educational projects via the Internet.

This report defines Internet twinning as the use of multimedia and exchange tools (email, videoconferencing, joint development of websites) to flesh out or set up ties and cooperation between schools. Such twinning requires an overarching framework for cooperation between schools which must take into account all the conditions needed for sound twinning, in particular the organisation of periodic meetings and exchanges, the development of joint projects and materials, plus regular contacts to enrich project conduct.

From traditional twinning to Internet twinning

The twinning links in education referred to by the European Council could take various forms, viz.: pupil-to-pupil relations, teacher-to-teacher, class-to-class and school-to-school. They may involve nothing more than exchanges of information or documentation, the mounting of discovery or research projects or, more elaborately, form an integral part of the educational system.

By making for speedy exchanges, immediate communication, access to sources of knowledge (education, culture, media, public information, etc.) and enabling the use of on-line language translation tools, the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) make it possible to totally revamp twinning forms and functions and to spread them across Europe as a whole by incorporating them even more into teaching methods and approaches. Internet twinning opens up new opportunities for enhancing relations and exchanges between all young Europeans, teachers and schools, thereby underpinning mutual understanding, stimulating pupils into playing an active role, fostering their spirit of initiative, and bringing out the European dimension in education, so as to create the social and cultural ties needed for interlinking and fanning out the European knowledge area. It opens up rewarding prospects, based on thousands of school partnerships involving some two million pupils and hundreds of projects involving educational use of ICTs made possible by the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes. The infrastructures nowadays available, thanks to Member States' efforts and introduction of the *e*Europe action plan, will help impart a new stimulus to European cooperation.

In keeping with this, the Internet twinning scheme fits in well with the vision of mobility pursued, whereby every young European – during their time at secondary school – can participate in an educational project of his/her choice (provided their teachers agree) with one or more pupils or teachers located in one or more other countries. To achieve this, secondary schools need to have the requisite infrastructures and necessary training and support in order to progressively nurture – through the Internet – structured learning ties in a multimedia environment that is both multilingual and multicultural.

Several avenues and lines of action adopted by the European Council since its Lisbon 2000 meeting (Stockholm 2001, Barcelona 2002) in the endeavour to set up a European knowledge area demonstrate how relevant the Internet twinning project covering the whole European Union is, and allow us to look forward confidently to its successful implementation; these include:

– Setting up **learning partnerships** between schools, training centres, firms or other educational resource centres *(Lisbon 2000)*. Internet twinning takes the form of active partnerships between schools that can be expanded to other knowledge players (media, cultural institutions, firms, youth associations, etc.) when running educational projects shared by the twinned schools.

– **Encouraging mobility** *(Stockholm 2001)*. By helping schools, teachers and pupils to get to know one another and take part in exchanges and multilingual dialogue, Internet twinning fosters mutual comprehension and joint endeavours, and can be seen as paving the way for or supplementing physical mobility.

– **Improving mastery of basic skills**, in particular language learning, **and developing digital literacy** *(Barcelona 2002)*. Twinning arrangements entail concrete use of the Internet and the new information technologies, they constitute an active teaching method

through which pupils learn how to handle informatics tools which they can then use on a life-long basis to acquire skills.

– **Promoting the European dimension in education** and integrating it into pupils' basic skills by 2004 *(Barcelona 2002)*. Internet twinning between schools in different Member States enables cooperation on educational projects and is a specific manifestation of this goal.

Implementation of the Internet twinning project

Given the commitments entered into by the Union and its Member States, the Commission believes it possible and desirable for all secondary schools in all European Union Member States – i.e. about 150 000 schools – to have signed an Internet agreement with one or more schools in one or more different Member States by the end of 2006. In the Commission's view this project can be translated into reality on the following bases.

Setting up infrastructures, equipping secondary schools and operating twinning partnerships

The Union and its Member States have entered into specific commitments in this field[1]. The European Union has stressed that the infrastructures for achieving these objectives should be put in place rapidly. In was in this spirit that the Lisbon European Council invited Member States to take measures to ensure that:

– all schools in the Union have Internet access and multimedia resources by the end of 2001,

– a sufficient number of teachers are able to use the Internet and multimedia resources by the end of 2002.

The Barcelona European Council called on Member States to ensure that by the end of 2003, the ratio of Internet-connected PCs to pupils is brought down across the European Union to one for every fifteen pupils.

Precise complementary aims and actions for schools have been defined on this basis in the "*e*Learning: Designing Tomorrow's Education" Communication (24 May 2000) and Action Plan (28 March 2001), while respecting subsidiarity. They mainly have to do with ensuring the availability of support services and educational resources on the Internet, together with on-line learning platforms for teachers, pupils and parents, plus analysis of and reflection on educational uses and the dissemination of best practices.

Given the nature of twinning partnerships, operating costs for an Internet twinning arrangement can be estimated at an average of from €1 500 to €10 000 per year depending on the cost of visits, training, extra equipment and Internet communications. This amount varies even more from one school to another – given the notable differences between countries and even within one and the same country – and depending on how educationally ambitious the twinning arrangement is. The cost should be borne by the Member States' competent authorities.

Operating costs will vary extensively, depending on the weighting given to these various parameters and on local conditions for remote cooperation (rapid Internet access for pupils,

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[1] Lisbon European Council – 23 and 24 March 2000

broadband access for videoconferencing, partnerships with local authorities and/or providers of content, services or equipment).

Training for teachers and teacher-trainers

The availability of a structured framework of exchange and support, especially from a teaching angle, and the development of training courses for cooperative Internet use are essential components, otherwise distance communication between pupils will more often than not remain anecdotal and superficial in content terms. The Internet is a tool, not an end in itself.

Such frameworks and training courses will generally be set up at regional or national level, even if European-level models can be proposed, as shown by the "European Schoolnet" initiative involving 24 Education Ministries. Since twinning is meant to have a mobilising effect, it is essential to give training. The purpose is not to make people familiar with information and communication technologies as such, but to ensure they are successfully incorporated into very diverse teaching practices.

A number of elements need to be taken into consideration, i.e. the need for a project teaching approach that covers the multilingual and multicultural dimensions; the relevance of multimedia tools for the educational projects; the heavy involvement of teachers required for this teaching approach; and the inclusion of new twinning partnerships in projects already under way in schools.

In order to ensure future twinning partnerships are successful, it is essential to mobilise the education players at competent authority level around several types of action, viz.:

– advising and training schools on/in the practicalities of twinning;

– training teachers in 'cooperative' Internet use (for cooperation between pupils and teachers), bearing in mind national specificities, access inequalities and the notable differences in Internet usage;

– training head teachers in how to set up and incorporate such projects into their school setting.

This training drive will be based on the traditional teacher training structures (universities, specialised institutes). It also requires interaction with national or regional structures already involved in assisting schools with their strategy on educational use of ICTs.

Back-up in terms of support for services and content

Specialised structures or services need to be set up in Member States to develop, support and get the best out of Internet twinning. The role of such structures would, for example, be to:

– propose twinning models to secondary schools;

– assist in the search for partners within the European Union and outside (as part of intercultural dialogue);

– develop a European-level Internet platform to provide on-line advice and assistance for school heads, teachers, parents, etc., and facilitate access to knowledge sources (cultural institutions, media, public information, etc.) and on-line translation aids;

– see to the follow-up and sustainability of the most successful projects and intensify the exchange of good practices.

At European level, the Union has already experimented with such assistance. For example, a number of modules were devised for pooling resources and exchanging information among schools under the "My Europe" project and the "eSchola" action.

Numerous topics possible

Although the choice of twinning cooperation topics is up to Member States' competent authorities – local authorities, schools and teachers – it is worthwhile recalling that twinning traditionally focuses on topics largely covered by the Socrates programme and which dovetail particularly well with achievement of the Lisbon process aims. For example:

– Learning languages. the communication involved in twinning requires progressive learning and mastery of the partner's language. This takes place through educational discovery or research projects mapped out and put into action jointly.

– Intercultural dialogue. One of the main features of twinning is reinforcing the dialogue between different communities within the European Union, and in particular to focus on elements enabling comparative studies. It also helps to generalise projects among pupils in countries in the European Union and in Central and Eastern Europe, with extensions to third countries, especially the Mediterranean ones, in keeping with the conclusions of the Valencia 2002 Euromed Ministerial Conference.

– European citizenship. This entails not only civic and political education but also progressively anchoring a European dimension in the education imparted in the various countries.

– Multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches. A number of exchanges between pupils on the ground have a "transdisciplinary" dimension, i.e. environmental education, intercultural education, and cultural exchanges on topics such as peace, tolerance and openness towards others.

Staging publicity events and demonstrations at European level

Publicity events and demonstrations staged at European level should ensure a high profile for the "Internet Twinning" project, and also draw the attention of those in charge of education – and beyond them public opinion – to its importance for society and Europe.

The Commission has been staging such events for a number of years now and they have proven to be a real success, viz.:

the Netd@ys bring together several tens of thousands of schools across the European Union for one week every year, with the focus on specific projects (creation of websites, multimedia productions, on-line chats and videoconferences, discovery trails, etc.), thereby helping to promote educational use of the Internet and the new technologies and to foster cooperation and exchanges between schools in Europe. These projects often lead to twinning and permanent ties between partner schools.

eSchola, a week for eLearning, is a measure launched in 2001 under the eLearning Action Plan adopted by the Commission in April 2001 to make teachers aware of the good teaching practices developed by schools in Europe using the new technologies. Over a thousand schools joined in the week when it was held for the first time. This figure doubled in 2002, and schools in Mediterranean countries can also join in eSchola week, the aim being to foster intercultural dialogue.

These initiatives are good examples of the kind of publicity events and demonstrations which would be staged when generalising Internet twinning across the European Union countries.

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OPERATIONAL CONCLUSIONS

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In the light of the foregoing, the European Commission, responding favourably to the wishes expressed by the Barcelona European Council, reaffirms its interest in and commitment to achieving the ambitious goal of providing, before the end of 2006, all secondary schools with the option of setting up twinning links via the Internet to enable them to become involved in joint educational projects. This goal fits in with the future developments already mapped out by the education and research programmes and underpinned by introduction of the eEurope and eLearning Action Plans.

It believes that this project is fully in keeping with the general outline drawn up in Lisbon and fleshed out in Stockholm and Barcelona, which aims to intensify and improve the use of the new technologies, the Internet in particular, to develop a digital culture and achieve education systems' future aims. This initiative will, for instance, help motivate young people to learn foreign languages and promote the European dimension in education.

The Commission looks forward to receiving the Seville European Council's support for implementation of this Internet Twinning project, which is founded on action by the local, regional and national authorities and also the Community institutions, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity and ensuring complementarity of efforts. The involvement of national, regional or local authorities is a must – for putting in place the necessary infrastructures and equipment, for training teachers, providing the wherewithal to cover twinning operating costs and for establishing national or regional reference centres for Internet twinning. A support framework will also be set up at Community level through:

– provision of input from Community programmes on education and training to devise innovative teaching methods, content and practices relating to networking and virtual mobility;

– adoption of an eLearning programme which the Commission will present during the second half of 2002, in keeping with the wishes of the European Parliament and the European Council.

The European Union's financial contribution to this project will draw on the existing possibilities in the education and training programmes and will be examined in connection with the preparations for a future multiannual programme devoted to e-learning.

The eLearning programme will focus in part on promoting and developing Internet twinning partnerships so as to foster, in particular, the creation of contact centres plus support, publicity and demonstration activities at Community level, and exchanges of good practices, especially in training. Preparatory and exploratory actions will be mounted during preparation of the Internet Twinning scheme to guarantee its success.