

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Report from the Commission: The Concrete Future Objectives of Education Systems'

(2002/C 19/08)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the report from the Commission to the Council — the concrete future objectives of education systems (COM(2001) 59 final);

having regard to the decision of the Commission of 26 April 2001, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult it on this matter;

having regard to the decision taken by its President of 11 June 2001, to draw up an opinion on this matter and to instruct Commission 7 (Education, Vocational Training, Culture, Youth, Sport & Citizens' rights) to undertake the preparatory work;

having regard to the conclusion of the March 2000 European Council conclusion 'to undertake a general reflection on the concrete future objectives of education systems, focusing on common concerns and priorities while respecting national diversity';

having regard to the European Commission communication on 'e-learning' (COM(2000) 318 final);

having regard to the European Commission memorandum on lifelong learning (COM(2000) 1832 final);

having regard to the CoR Opinion 'Memorandum on lifelong learning' (CdR 19/2001 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to the CoR opinion on 'e-learning — designing tomorrow's education' (CdR 314/2000 fin) ⁽²⁾;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 89/2001 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 7 on 29 June 2001 (rapporteur: Mr O'Neachtain, IRL-EA);

whereas education and training have an input into achieving European social and economic cohesion;

whereas the need to ensure equal access to education must be addressed;

whereas the rapid changes in technologies have a major impact on society and the workplace;

whereas the varied institutional approaches to education and training, must be recognised throughout the European Union;

whereas there is an absolute need to ensure the elimination of illiteracy;

whereas the rapidly changing skills needs of business and employers generally must be taken into account,

adopted the following opinion at its 40th plenary session of 19 and 20 September 2001 (meeting of 19 September).

The Committee of the Regions

1. Welcomes the publication of this report on 'The Concrete Future Objectives of Educational Systems'.

2. Supports the five concrete objectives defined which can form the basis for Authorities across the Union to work together in the medium term.

3. Regrets that the municipal and regional authorities, which frequently shoulder political and financial responsibility for the education sector in the Member States, were not

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 357, 14.12.2001, p. 36.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p. 34.

- involved in framing the five objectives; it urges the Commission in future to involve the local and regional authorities in updating objectives and/or in framing new objectives for the Member States' education systems.
4. Deems it essential that all young persons receive a high standard of basic skills including social skills before leaving the educational system.
 5. Wishes to see stated as an absolute goal of the Union that 'no young person should exit the educational system at whatever age without being able to read and write competently'.
 6. Would like a renewed emphasis on Mathematics and Science subjects and measures put in place to attract young persons to study these subjects in second and third level educational institutions given that in some regions there is a decreasing number of students studying these subjects. This must not however mean neglecting the humanities subjects, as they are a means of providing pupils with a mature critical capacity that can be applied to any field of thought.
 7. Recognises a potential problem in young persons leaving the educational system at an early age to take up employment in low opportunity jobs.
 8. Wishes to see a major emphasis on skills training and the on-going identification and provision of new skills as required in the workplace. A particular emphasis is needed on information and communications technologies as they are essential in the modern workplace. Schemes such as work placements would facilitate this objective.
 9. Advocates a cooperative approach to trade apprenticeship and a renewed emphasis on high-level apprenticeship programmes.
 10. Recommends that a systematic programme of updating skills and mutual recognition of standardised trade qualifications be put in place across the EU.
 11. Wishes to see the learning difficulties of special groups including gifted children, slow learners etc. being recognised in the document, with the objective being that no young person should be denied access to appropriate learning programmes for social, economic or infrastructure reasons.
 12. Restates the need to train teachers to ensure that new immigrants can be educated in mainstream systems.
 13. Asks the Commission to further enhance and promote programmes of transnational short-term placement of teachers, a system such as year-long sabbaticals available in cycles of 7-10 years would improve the method of exchange of good practice.
 14. Agrees with the five main concerns of Member States: Quality, Access, Content, Openness and Effectiveness of Educational Systems.
 15. Suggests that, given the need for greater social cohesion, access for all citizens of all ages to educational systems and opportunities should be the top priority for Europe.
 16. Supports the promotion of lifelong learning and wishes to ensure that new competencies such as ICT skills etc. are incorporated into the process.
 17. Sees new technologies as tools which can enhance the quality of all teaching, learning and education generally.
 18. While, once again stressing the absolute importance of literacy and numeracy skills, believes that the schooling and education systems must also foster the development in young people of the qualities of creativity, confidence, self-esteem, solidarity and democratic respect, which will enable them to develop and function as good citizens throughout their lives and which will motivate them to have a lifelong interest in learning and education.
 19. Urges schools and educational institutions at all levels to see their roles in terms not only of the full-time students but also of the wider community. All the structures and resources of education systems must be regarded and offered as resources which are available to entire local communities.
 20. Recognises a special need to apply and maximize the use and benefits of education systems to support capacity building and development of resources within peripheral rural and maritime regions of Europe.
 21. Wishes to use schools and education systems to increase awareness of and promote local and indigenous cultures and languages. This is especially necessary within regions of lesser used languages and minority cultures.
 22. Deems it necessary that schools and education institutions be encouraged and supported to promote and develop greater environmental awareness at local community and regional levels across Europe.

23. Wishes that education systems would integrate into their programmes, social, economic and historical awareness of the European Union and its institutions.
24. Urges renewed efforts to focus on the ways in which education can be made more attractive for citizens of all ages. Current participation by older, non-traditional students in education varies very much across Europe.
25. Recognises the need for a new Europe-wide social partnership and contract, which will promote investment in education and training for all citizens (particularly the most excluded).
26. Asks the Commission to consider the issue of paid educational leave for workers across the Union.
27. Urges Member States to enhance and expand education systems across Europe in ways that will develop, to a uniformly high standard, the skills and competencies of citizens of all Member States. A central part of this enhancement must include greater support and recognition for the professional role of teachers and educators and enhancement of the status of our teachers who play a critical role in national economic and social development.
28. Supports the call for a strengthening of the links between the business world and educational and training institutions. These links should endeavour to ensure that students receive the appropriate skills needed for modern day employment. Care is necessary to ensure that there is not a narrowing of skills being taught. Given the rapid change of modern economies, this could result in medium term problems or reduced flexibility in the workforce.
29. Strongly supports the emphasis on developing a spirit of enterprise and innovation. This must be encouraged in young people in the formal educational system and from a young age.
30. Endorses the Commissions view that there are adequate objectives identified and also that all objectives would benefit from a process of peer review and exchange of good practice and some attempt at comparison of progress. These processes are to be the central elements of the open method of coordination.
31. Proposes that the open method of co-ordination should identify and diffuse good policy practice across the Union while taking into account its adaptability in different national and regional contexts.
32. Proposes that priority be given to the areas of basic skills, mathematics and science and information and communication technologies when a work programme is being launched.
33. Recognises the different institutional arrangements in Member States, but nevertheless supports efforts in identifying progress in implementing the objectives across Europe.
34. Requests that any proposed system of evaluation, encompassing indicators and benchmarking, should be referred to the Committee of the Regions before its final adoption.
35. While supporting assessment of progress based on qualitative indicators, wishes to ensure that any progression index takes account of both differences in starting points and socio-economic background.
36. Recommends that the resources and mechanisms are put in place to enable all students, regardless of starting point or socio-economic background, achieve European wide agreed standards.
37. Proposes that the overall goal of education systems across Europe should be to produce learned citizens who are not only literate and numerate, but who are competent and confident personally, socially, culturally, environmentally and technologically and who are vocationally and professionally competent in their place of work.

Brussels, 19 September 2001.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Jos CHABERT