Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on adult learning — It is always a good time to learn

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(2008/C 204/19)

On 27 September 2007, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on adult learning — It is always a good time to learn.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 21 February 2008. The rapporteur was Ms Heinisch. The co-rapporteurs were Ms Le Nouail Marlière and Mr Rodríguez García-Caro.

At its 443rd plenary session, held on 12 and 13 March (meeting of 13 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 117 votes to nil with one abstention.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The Committee welcomes the European Commission's move to open up a new facet of its education and training work programme through its first action plan on adult learning. It is always a good time to learn, covering the period 2007-2010. The Committee backs the plan, subject to the comments set out in this opinion.

1.2 The Committee is pleased that, thirteen years after their introduction, the European programmes designed to promote adult learning are, for the first time, to be given their own political working base. The Commission communication on adult learning (1) that preceded the action plan, did, as it itself indicates, have a twofold objective: to prepare the ground for the ‘Grundtvig’ (2) programme on the one hand, and to formulate a corresponding political action plan for adult learning on the other.

1.3 The Committee regrets that this first plan does not yet include among its priorities the expansion of non-vocational adult learning, i.e. the non-formal and informal learning opportunities that people — those in employment and others — need to further their overall personal development and strengthen democratic citizenship. It notes that the action plan devotes a great deal of attention to the familiar objectives — which the Committee also supports — of improving European cooperation in the field of vocational training.

1.4 The Committee urges that an attractive environment should also be created to meet the specific learning interests of people not in employment as a conduit to their ‘active participation’ in lifelong learning.

1.5 Against the backdrop of demographic change, the Committee feels that a major shift is needed in the way adult learning is organised and in the topics it covers.

1.6 The Committee would also urge that, across all areas of education and training, careful thought be given to why, in the way they divide up their work, various tiers of education policy continue to focus — sometimes with a degree of overlap — on young adults, and would instead suggest that specific adult learning structures be put in place in all Member States and at a European level.

1.7 The Committee urges that nothing be done that might further marginalise smaller adult learning initiatives and facilities — or indeed squeeze them out completely — but that, instead, steps be taken to bolster their position.

1.8 The Committee feels that the main task of adult learning must not be to ‘compensate’ for any shortcomings in a less-than-effective formal education system. It is concerned that the number of early school-leavers has risen to over 15%. It calls on the Member States and on the Commission to draw on the many examples of good practice in Europe and the OECD countries to press forward with socially oriented reforms in the educational field.

1.9 The Committee would ask the European Commission to draw up an accompanying plan to foster gender mainstreaming.

1.10 The Committee regrets the absence of any clear statements on the investment required.

1.11 The Committee recommends that greater attention be paid to the territorial dimension of adult learning and its contribution to social cohesion, particularly in regions in decline.

(1) Adult learning: It is never too late to learn (COM(2006) 614 final).

(2) With his democratic and social ideas, the Danish adult educationalist F.S. Grundtvig, was, in the 19th century, the inspiration behind the movement towards residential adult education centres (German: Heimvolkshochschulen). From 2001, the European Commission named the second adult education scheme under the new Socrates programme (2001-2006) the Grundtvig Action in his honour.
1.12 The Committee regrets that no consideration has been given to the specific types of adult teaching and learning practised in supraregional and European residential adult education centres (German: Heimvollshochschulen).

1.13 The Committee recommends that steps be taken to promote new-style, multifunctional local adult education centres incorporating new technologies and e-learning.

1.14 The Committee advocates decent working conditions for teaching and administrative staff in the adult learning sector and a decent, enabling learning environment for all adults.

1.15 The Committee would urge that a feasibility study be conducted with a view to establishing, as part of the action plan, dedicated European infrastructure for research and continuing education and training in the adult learning sector and points out that work is also needed on the specific methods of adult education and their dissemination.

1.16 The Committee asks that steps be taken to promote European learning festivals as part of the international learning festival movement, and advocates that European information and motivation campaigns be conducted in a bid to make adult learning more attractive.

1.17 The Committee would ask the European Commission to give greater attention in future to the international dimension of adult learning and to involve the Committee in developments in this area. The Committee asks to be involved in the European preparations for the next UN International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) due to take place in Brazil in 2009.

1.18 The Committee welcomes European Commission moves to establish a set of core European data and secure greater convergence in the language used, but regrets the absence in the planned indicators of priorities more clearly specific to adult learning.

2. Introduction

2.1 Many European countries can look back on a long tradition of adult learning. Given its close links with movements on social issues such as workers’ and women’s rights, and with national and suffrage movements, adult learning for a long time had its own social and emancipatory educational agenda. Adult learning centres and adult residential schools — designed to include both cultural and educational dimensions and to promote personal development and democratic citizenship for all — came to be established in many European countries. Over time, these were supplemented by second-chance schools, vocational training facilities and colleges deliberately aimed at, among others, hitherto disadvantaged sectors of the population.

2.2 At European level, the focus of interest was for a long time on vocational training, with the establishment of commit-tees and specialised technical bodies such as CEDEFOP and the European Training Foundation (ETF). As early as the 1970s, European programmes started to be developed and implemented to foster education and training opportunities for people with disabilities, migrants, and young people with no school or vocational qualifications, and to promote equal opportunities for women on the labour market. CEDEFOP became a forum for exchanging and appraising examples of good practice in this area.

2.3 It was not until the introduction of lifelong learning into the political arena that the European Commission also opened the door to hitherto neglected areas such as adult learning, the poor relation of education and training policy. A new stage of wide-ranging political activity began with the adoption of specific programmes to improve quality and innovation in areas like adult learning (from 1995 onwards), the designation of 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and the principles established in the Council conclusions of 20 December 1996 on a strategy for lifelong learning. On 30 October 2000, the European Commission published the Memorandum on Life-long Learning which maps out a strategy for the development of a lifelong learning system and puts forward six key messages for discussion setting the broad objectives of this system (*)

2.4 As part of the Lisbon strategy, the Council adopted decisions on lifelong learning (*) and drew up the Education and Training 2010 work programme (*) which still failed, in its initial phase, to devote any specific attention to adult learning. In a bid to consolidate a common European vocational education and training policy, the Education and Training 2010 work programme also kick-started the Copenhagen process, an initial outcome of which is reflected in the Helsinki Communiqué (*) published at the end of 2006.

2.5 Higher education policy was also part of the work programme but, from 1999 under the Bologna process, had also focused on major restructuring in a bid to create a European Higher Education Area. This initially marginalised moves to open up higher education institutions to disadvantaged target groups and relegated to the fringes the very remit of providing university-level continuing education and training.

2.6 In addition to activities under the Education and Training 2010 work programme, the past few years have also seen European-level moves to secure the integrated promotion of young people’s full participation in education, employment and society (9). No measures of this kind are yet in place for adults in different age groups.

2.7 The European Commission’s New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (8) and its communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalising world (9) also indirectly opened up new pathways for adult learning.

It is never too late to learn the same subject. It always a good time to learn. The action plan seeks to lay down five European-level priorities: improving the structures for governance including quality, efficiency and accountability in the delivery of adult learning, learning support and recognition of learning outcomes.

The purpose of the action plan is to implement the objectives of the earlier Commission communication (4): ‘to remove barriers to participation; to increase the quality and efficiency of the sector; to speed up the process of validation and recognition; to ensure sufficient investment; and to monitor the sector.’

The action plan focuses on those who, because of their low level of education, inadequate vocational qualifications and/or skills, have little prospect of successful integration into society.

The Committee is pleased that the European Commission has drawn up a first action plan on adult learning covering the period 2007–2010. The Committee backs this plan wholeheartedly, subject to the comments set out in this opinion. As the action plan again makes clear, the purpose of the Education and Training 2010 work programme is also to promote adult learning as a means of fostering social cohesion, encouraging active citizenship, facilitating a fulfilling private and professional life and securing greater adaptability and employability.

The Committee would warn against any inefficient overlap with vocational training objectives and projects under the Copenhagen process, the 2005–2008 European employment guidelines, the European Social Fund and the Leonardo da Vinci vocational education and training programme. Particular attention is already given in this context to expanding information and advice services, recognising informally acquired skills, building up and implementing the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and furthering good governance in vocational training institutions.

The Committee continues to believe that all European citizens need lifelong access to modern adult learning opportunities. Throughout life, everyone should have the opportunity to acquire, refresh and update their skills. Demographic change, climate change, new information and communication technologies and the challenges and opportunities of globalisation are altering our professional and private lives, necessitating completely new knowledge and skills which adults in different age groups had no opportunity to acquire when they were at school, in training or in higher education.

The Committee thus regrets the absence of an integrated, visionary concept that takes account of the learning opportunities and learning needs of all adults. Moreover, the Committee has consistently called for an enabling learning environment for all, including people with disabilities. This generates a range of synergies for all stakeholders, and also facilitates intergenerational, intercultural and multilingual learning.

As an adjunct to the action plan, the Committee would ask the Commission to assign to a group of adult learning experts the task of drawing up a gender mainstreaming plan that also includes positive action and takes due account of the need for lifelong learning.

The Committee would draw attention to the European reference framework for key competences (5) that every adult should be in a position to acquire. Reference is thereby consistently made to a range of pivotal concepts that can also underpin new organisational departures and innovative teaching methods in the field of adult learning: critical reflection, creativity, initiative, problem-solving, risk assessment, decision-making and emotional intelligence.

The Committee would encourage the Commission to consider whether the adult learning action plan might not be enriched by an attractively staged annual European learning festival and by information and motivation campaigns on lifelong learning in the press and on radio and television. The Committee calls on the Commission to address the need for outreach to encourage learning among people who have hitherto been remote from it. The Committee feels that this personal contact with socially disadvantaged people is a key element in moves to raise levels of education, boost adaptability skills for all, and secure greater equality of access to lifelong learning.

The Committee welcomes the fact that, at the outset (point 1), the action plan not only highlights the goal of a competitive, knowledge-based economy but also bases its approach on the vision of a knowledge society for all, that is mindful of social inclusion and social cohesion. The Committee thus also feels that any consideration of further education and training requirements and of pathways to integration through lifelong learning should also involve local players such as the social partners, businesses and civil society organisations, as well as adults placed at an educational disadvantage and their families.

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(5) Ibid.

(6) COM(2005) 548 final, see also the EESC opinion on the key competences in: OJ C195, 18.8.2006. Rapporteur: Ms Herczog. Alongside competence in communication both in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, alongside mathematical competence and competence in science and technology, alongside digital competence and learning to learn, other dimensions — social and civic competence, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and cultural expression — are also equally valid.
5.1.1 The Committee stresses that the advancement of people whom the Commission terms 'low-skilled' requires not only that they themselves change, but also that steps be taken to break down the continuing barriers to learning. The Committee feels that, in the selection of target groups, the action plan fails to take due account of the barriers to learning facing people who are disadvantaged on a number of fronts, people living in poverty, in regions and localities in decline, and in homes, institutions and secure units.

5.1.2 The Committee would warn against the risk of further segregation as a result of local and supraregional 'trading' in services for such adults, for instance in cases where the work and welfare authorities contract out special education and training measures. It considers that adults would react even more positively to opportunities for training if they were given useful information on the state of the local and supraregional labour market as part of their studies and if, when applying for jobs, they were not likely to face age restrictions, either in practice or in law.

5.1.3 The Committee would stress that the linguistic and cultural richness brought to bear by migrants from both European and non-European countries is one of the Europe's key assets. Further steps should be taken to recognise degrees and other certificates from countries both inside and outside Europe. The Committee would point out that the highly diverse legal status of migrants (e.g. asylum seekers, recognised refugees, migrant workers from within Europe, third-country nationals etc.) often restricts these people's access to further education and training, although it also results in certain education and training measures — such as language courses — becoming mandatory.

5.1.4 The Committee feels that no clear conclusions are drawn from the impact of demographic change on opportunities for lifelong learning among the older generation who are no longer in paid employment. The Committee points to the many and varied recommendations set out in its own-initiative opinion on demographic change (13). This opinion clearly states that that people of any age need to expand their knowledge base both in their private lives and at a professional level in order to help shape this development, to shoulder responsibility for others and to be able to live an independent life for as long as possible. In many professional fields, additional skills are needed, while in others, completely new service patterns are emerging for which initial and further training should be provided at an early stage.

5.1.5 For this action plan too, the Committee recommends 'making provision for learners with special needs, and actively taking into account the specific needs of people with disabilities, in particular by helping to promote their integration into mainstream education and training' (14) and by stepping up access to distance learning (e-learning).

5.1.6 The Committee is critical that too little attention is paid to the personal learning needs of adults who, although not economically active, are committed members of their communities and of society. They often lack sufficient resources to access adult learning.

5.1.7 The Committee recommends opening up the entire formal education system more fully to the learning needs of adults. It would thus repeat its statement that the time is ripe 'to move beyond the age-related educational restrictions imposed on the European public by the European education and training systems' (15). Satisfactory skills acquired earlier in life should be recognised within an open and more flexible formal education system. Access for all to IT equipment in educational institutions could help encourage lifelong learning and learning via the Internet.

5.1.8 Continuing learning at universities has taken a back seat in higher education policy. Universities must also assume responsibility for lifelong learning. The Committee notes that adult education provided by universities and continuing education for graduates should be closely linked to the development of adult education and be incorporated into lifelong learning arrangements.

5.2 The Committee notes that the overall objective of the adult learning action plan should be to put into practice the five key messages of the Commission communication It is never too late to learn. The Committee is unhappy that no action at all is proposed for the fourth key message (ensuring sufficient investment), and feels that a fourth action of this kind must at all costs be included in the plan.

5.2.1 The Committee would also recommend that industry and government put in place incentives to attract people into further learning. Expectations of a 'return' on investment by further education and training institutions (point 2.2 of the action plan) cannot be the only motivation in moves to secure greater equality of opportunity in access to lifelong learning.

5.2.2 The Committee feels that no sound estimate has yet been made of the costs involved in recognising informally acquired skills. In a pre-emptive move, the Committee would warn that this must not under any circumstances be taken as a reason for abandoning any further expansion of adult learning provision. As vectors for skills recognition, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (15) and the national qualifications frameworks will, in a number of Member States, remain in the early stages of development during the 2007-2010 period covered by the action plan.


(15) Ibid.

5.2.3 The Committee also stresses the long-term social and economic costs of such large groups of people within society with such low levels of general and vocational education and training.

5.2.4 The Committee notes that indications of welcome moves for a potential opening of the ESF and the lifelong learning programme presuppose considerable shifts in emphasis at the expense of the priorities that have been in place to date, and will also require governments to use their own resources in the adult learning sector. It notes that only a few European countries and regions can draw on the ESF to any large degree to fund innovation but not as a rule to finance adult learning. The ongoing redistribution of ESF funding in the new Member States will also result in restrictions being imposed in other regions.

5.3 The Committee is pleased that the European social partners and non-governmental organisations, having been involved in the consultation process (point 1.1 of the action plan) during the preparatory stage, also have a role to play in the delivery of the action plan and are able to bring their specific expertise to bear. The EESC notes that particular attention should be paid to securing decent working conditions for service providers and a decent and enabling learning environment for adult learners, and to ensuring that such learners can also draw on their user rights, regardless of whether they pay for these services out of their own pockets or not.

5.4 For the continuing work on the action plan, the Committee also recommends the involvement of a number of European Commission directorates-general and the relevant European bodies. Cooperation of this kind would foster policy coherence between the objectives and activities of the individual directorates-general.

5.5 The Committee also welcomes the involvement in the consultation process of international organisations (point 1.1 of the action plan). As a next step, it would recommend that the European Commission, together with the directorates-general concerned, draw up an additional international adult learning action plan.

5.6 The Committee would ask that, in drawing up rules of good governance for adult learning facilities (point 2.2 of the action plan), sufficient scope be retained for diversity and plurality so that smaller, not-for-profit providers offering significant cultural added value and operating with innovative working methods also have the opportunity of securing support.

5.7 The Committee feels that modern, multifunctional local learning centres are vital to good governance (point 2.2 of the action plan).

5.7.1 The Committee welcomes the introductory reference to the ‘partnership’ desirable in cities and regions (point 2), but regrets the absence of any specific recommendations on the need for coordination in the systematic expansion of adult learning in a particular area. In this regard, the Committee would draw attention to the exemplary Learning Cities and Learning Regions movement in Europe (19).

5.7.2 The Committee also recommends that, as part of the action plan, greater attention be paid to the construction of new, local, visionary and attractive learning centres for all adults across all regions of Europe. Much adult learning still has to be delivered in shared accommodation that was actually built for a different purpose and is only available at certain times.

5.7.3 The Committee regrets the lack of any express inclusion in the action plan of residential adult education centres (German: Heimvolkshochschulen) since, in terms of teaching methods, these, among others, shine out as beacons of European adult learning. The fact that these centres have boarding facilities makes them key meeting points for learners and teachers on the move from across Europe. Over the last ten years, subsidies to these centres have been cut considerably, and a number — including those with a high European profile — have closed in recent years.

5.8 The Committee feels that the opportunities and difficulties involved in new communications technologies should be more fully reflected in the implementation of the action plan and should also be factored into the action plan itself to a greater extent. Lack of IT access is a further dimension of social exclusion and is becoming an ever more acute problem. For instance, 46% of all households in Europe have no home Internet access (18) and 40% of Europeans admit to having no Internet skills (18). Little progress has yet been forthcoming in opening up free Internet-based learning opportunities more fully to all adults, even although, at the same time, patents for appropriate learning concepts are under discussion and have already been applied for (18).

5.9 The Committee recognises that employers provide a large portion of training to adults (point 2.2 of the action plan). However, trade unions also promote adult learning in their own facilities and at the workplace, for instance by providing local and transnational courses via their own organisations and by putting in place motivational advice and support services for learning provision at the workplace. It is important to ensure that the action plan strikes a balance between the learning opportunities on offer and fair access conditions for all learners.

5.10 The Committee attaches importance to the principle that, even where it is the state that provides basic and project-specific support to particular facilities, the freedom of continuing education and training providers to decide on their own curricula and on how they shape their programme — and their right to choose their own staff — must remain sacrosanct, although compliance with certain quality and efficiency standards is imperative.

(19) Persons aged 16 to 74, EU-27 (Eurostat, as at 8.2.2008).
(18) Examples may be found in the paper published by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture Enhancement Networks to promote the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning (The R3L Initiative), March 2003.
5.11 The Committee endorses the key message that good governance among adult learning providers should be learner-focused and welcomes the recommendation to establish 'close relations' with learners' organisations. Within the adult learning context, however, it feels that this does not go far enough.

5.11.1 The Committee regrets the lack of any clear statement on the participation of adult learners and on bodies lobbying on their behalf within the adult learning sector. In most European countries, the democratic rights of young school children and students have, to date, been covered by considerably more effective legal safeguards than those of adult learners.

5.11.2 The Committee proposes that any evaluations should focus on learners' own assessments. In particular, there should be an exchange of demand-related and learner-based quality testing models, which should have priority over the introduction of new state measures to 'monitor' provider quality (21).

5.11.3 The Committee would also propose that particular consideration be given to safeguarding the rights of adult users ('consumers') of paid education and training services. Steps should be taken to flesh out such rights, for instance in cases where participants are compelled to discontinue a course or are dissatisfied with it and withdraw, or in the event of timetabling changes or the cancellation of lessons. The recommendations for transport users' rights in Europe could serve as an example on which to draw.

5.12 The Committee agrees that the Member States and the Commission should pay more attention to initial and continuing training and to the status and payment of adult learning staff (point 3.2 of the action plan).

5.12.1 The Committee recognises that, being learner-focused, the adult learning sector requires highly flexible staff, but also asks that high staff flexibility should be combined with a high level of social security. The social partners could adopt support measures to counter the insecure employment status of teachers in this sector and to improve their participatory rights.

5.12.2 The Committee recommends that, in moves to bring a greater degree of professionalism into the sector, the focus should not only be on the specific skills needed to teach adults but also on actual expertise in the subject being taught, as it is on that that learning achievement very much depends.

5.12.3 The Committee would also suggest that studies and recommendations be prepared on the status of civil society volunteers working within the adult learning sector.

5.13 The Committee notes the priority objective of having as many adults as possible attain a 'one level higher qualification' (point 3.3 of the action plan). Within the overall context of adult learning, there is but limited value in classifying people and their learning objectives on the basis of educational attainment levels, although, in individual courses, particular attention must obviously be paid to grouping together people with similar levels of prior knowledge. Moreover, there can be no guarantee that, having attained a new formal level of education, people will also secure greater social recognition or even thereby find a job. The meeting of a wide range of quite different learners is, if anything, what gives flavour to many adult learning courses, or, expressed in economic terms, what constitutes the 'social capital' inherent in them.

5.14 Information should be given as to the indicators planned for the additional inclusion of non-vocational adult learning, of area-based delivery and, to a greater extent than in the past, also of non-age-limited education and training opportunities for people not in employment.


The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

(21) In Germany, support is given to the independent education and training testing foundation Stiftung Bildungstest.