

renewables (e.g. advantageous conditions governing access to networks and electricity supply grids), it is essential to set up long-term, broad-based market penetration programmes and to provide stronger support for applied research. At the same time there is a need for appropriate technical legislation widening access to the energy market and encouraging research into energy storage.

3.3. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the proposal to set up a network to promote renewable

energies. All key players in the field should be represented on this advisory forum — European, national, regional and local authorities, manufacturers and operators of renewable energy plant; umbrella organizations for individual, renewable energy sources; representatives of consumer organizations and energy supply enterprises. This advisory forum could offer support to the Commission in devising and implementing an Action Plan for renewables. In this connection the COR proposes the setting up of a programme to support associations active in the field of renewable energies.

Brussels, 16 July 1998.

*The Chairman*  
*of the Committee of the Regions*  
Manfred DAMMEYER

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**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Report from the Commission on Access to continuing training in the Union'**

(98/C 315/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Commission Report on Access to continuing training in the Union<sup>(1)</sup>;

having regard to its decision on 11 June 1997, in conformity with Article 198C fourth indent, to draw up an opinion on this subject and to attribute its preparation to Commission 6 — Education and Training;

having regard to its Opinion on The role of local and regional authorities in linking education and training establishments to enterprises (CdR 346/96 fin)<sup>(2)</sup>; its Opinion on The White Paper on Education and training: towards the learning society (CdR 115/96 fin)<sup>(3)</sup> and its Opinion on The European year of lifelong learning (CdR 244/94)<sup>(4)</sup>;

having regard to the draft opinion (CdR 424/97 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 6 on 16 January 1998 (rapporteur: Mrs Helene Lund);

whereas the COR in its opinion on The White Paper on Education and Training: towards the learning society, called for increased focus to be given to continuing training needs and ways to trigger participation in training programmes;

whereas the European Council, in its Resolution on growth and employment adopted at its meeting in Amsterdam on 16 June 1997, underlined that the development of a skilled, trained and adaptable workforce should be a priority aim and called for full attention to be given to training and education systems including lifelong learning in order to increase employability,

unanimously adopted the following Opinion at its 24th plenary session of 15 and 16 July 1998 (meeting of 15 July).

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<sup>(1)</sup> COM(97) 180 final.

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 116, 14.4.1997, p. 98.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 182, 24.6.1996, p. 15.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C 210, 14.8.1995, p. 74.

## 1. Introduction

1.1. The report constitutes a follow-up to the 1993 Recommendation of the Council of Ministers on access to continuing training and is based on a series of reports from the Member States and the social partners' organizations at Community level. It provides the first complete diagnosis of vocational training in Europe and is at the same time a draft for discussion on future objectives and initiatives in this field.

1.2. The Commission has worked with these questions since 1991 where a Memorandum was drawn up on continuing training. The basis has been the Recommendation of the Council of Ministers, June 1993, where fifteen recommendations were made to the Member States regarding initiatives on continuing training in the Union.

1.3. In the Recommendation of the Council of Ministers the following was agreed to:

- development of comparative information on continuing vocational training systems;
- introduction of a 'support mechanism' for the social dialogue on access to continuing training;
- production of reports from all the Member States on their initiatives and their follow-up on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers.

1.4. Primarily on the basis of these three elements the Commission now issues this report presenting a total assessment on the provision of access to continuing training in the separate Member States, together with recommendations for future action in this field.

1.5. The report focuses on the more descriptive information from the reports of the Member States and the organizations of the social partners as well as the more quantitative information from the huge Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS). The development in the individual Member States is analysed on the basis of seven aspects of continuing training in the European Union:

- access to continuing training and company policy;
- access to continuing training and individual requirements;
- retraining of employees;
- access to continuing training for specific target groups;
- access to continuing training and the new partnerships;
- access to continuing training by new technologies;

- use of community resources to support local initiatives.

1.6. Numerous, concrete examples of initiatives and results from the individual Member States are given in the different paragraphs.

1.7. In addition, the main conclusions from the reports by the partners under the social dialogue, UNICE, CEEP and ETUC are presented. These European labour market organizations do not agree in their evaluation of the status of access to continuing training in the Union. While the employers consider the situation satisfactory, the trade unions are of the opinion that hardly anything has changed since the 1993 Council Recommendation.

1.8. Finally the Commission presents the more quantitative information from the CVTS and points particularly at the following conclusions:

- only one worker in four has undergone some kind of continuing training (during the period in question).
- very substantial discrepancies exist between Member States and various company and worker categories which seem likely to continue or even widen.

1.9. Based on these reports the Commission finds that a lot has changed since the Recommendation of the Council in 1993 and that many promising initiatives have been started. The Commission, however, draws attention to the fact that huge differences and disparities still exist for employees, companies and Member States concerning opportunities and initiatives in this field. Furthermore, no attention seems to be paid to the increasing demand for access to continuing training.

1.10. Rapid technological development and a growing number of older employees necessitate more pronounced efforts to increase access to continuing training.

The Commission therefore proposes three initiatives:

- a dialogue with the social partners on access to continuing training;
- continuing analysis, exchange of experience and benchmarking through reports from the Member States and the actors in the labour market;
- higher priority to be given to continuing training in the EU programmes, i.e. Leonardo.

## 2. General comments

### *The relevance to local and regional authorities' concerns*

2.1. The COR has in its previous Opinion on 'The role of local and regional authorities in linking education and training establishments to enterprises' underlined the relevance of access to training in enterprises to local and regional development. Moreover, as indicated in that opinion, in many Member States local and regional authorities are vested with direct responsibility and powers in the field of training. As well as being providers of education and training they function as major public employers and are therefore directly concerned with both supply and demand in this field. They also have a central role to play in shaping the environment and conditions under which enterprises operate.

2.2. The relevance of training to local and regional authorities' concern has been expressly recognized by the Amsterdam Treaty which included training among the new areas of obligatory consultation of the COR.

2.3. The relevance of the specific subject under consideration 'access to continuing training' to local and regional development has, moreover, been acknowledged by the Council. In its Recommendation on the subject in 1993, it called on Member States to develop continuing training in order to make it an important feature of local and regional development, supporting partnerships, particularly at local or regional level, analysing the requirements of enterprises and employees in order to match supply and demand as closely as possible. Moreover, it also invited the Commission to support transfers of knowhow between Member States especially for the benefit of regions for whom access to continuing training is less developed.

2.4. The Commission in the report, devotes a whole section 1.2.6 to 'access and the new partnerships' which focuses on the local and regional approach to developing access to training. It points out that development is characterized by decentralization as reflected by increasing responsibility at the regional and local levels. This entails adjusting vocational training provision to the specific requirements of the regional and local companies and also setting up appropriate arrangements and infrastructures. These permit much closer cooperation between local authorities, training organizations, teaching and research establishments and companies, particularly the SMEs. The Commission notes that for many Member States this involves setting up 'regional and training networks'.

2.5. The Commission also points out that continuing training is a factor of regional and local development which fits into the framework of general instruments, represented by the regional vocational training development plans.

2.6. It notes that in Germany, there is a trend in decentralizing continuing vocational training. In Greece and France analysis of local requirements and dissemination of information are carried out by regional employment observatories, jointly organized and funded by the government and the regional authorities. In Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands regional labour market councils are set up combining employment integration measures and training. These are made up of representatives of the social partners, the municipal authorities and prefectures. Portugal has set up a network of local consultants to promote the industrial development of the SMEs through training programmes. The UK has set up local TECs/LECs which can adapt the national programmes instituted by the government to the local level and organize local measures adapted to local requirements.

2.7. Moreover, many of the initiatives targeting SMEs, outlined in the national reports, concern the local and regional level.

2.8. It should also be noted that the UNICE/CEEP report pointed out that tailoring training supply and demand to regional and local levels has been unsatisfactory, though steps have been taken to institute joint work between companies and training organizations and set up regional observatories. The ETUC report stressed that information existed at local and regional level on the requirements of companies and workers, though partnerships to analyse these requirements were few and far between.

## 3. Specific comments

The COR recommends the following lines of action:

3.1. The organization of consultations with the social and economic partners, involving local and regional government representatives, in order to develop at Community and sectoral level conditions for facilitating access.

3.1.1. Though recognition is given to the relevance of access to training to local and regional development and to the promising contribution local and regional partnerships can make in this area, no mention is made

of the importance of consulting and involving local and regional authorities in the debate, in particular the Committee of the Regions.

3.1.2. The COR calls on the Commission therefore to include local and regional government representatives within the consultation framework to develop conditions for facilitating access to training.

3.1.3. The Commission, in presenting its suggestions for future actions, indicates that these will be followed in due course by concrete proposals introducing the legal and operational instruments required. It is essential that the COR is consulted on all subsequent decisions and measures taken in this field.

3.1.4. Local and regional authorities' involvement in developing access to training is important in order to ensure that the qualifications likely to be acquired in continuing vocational training centres are consistent with the needs of enterprises and, more generally, those of the regional labour market as well as the new requirements of industrial production and systems of work — in particular in relation to information technologies — and that the transfer of skills and technology is promoted to problem areas. This was also indicated in the Opinion of the COR on 'the role of local and regional authorities in linking education and training establishments to enterprises'.

3.1.5. Furthermore, in that opinion, the benefits of increased cooperation at local and regional level between the education and training institutions and enterprises were outlined — in particular in relation to the planning of training programmes, customized training, retraining, etc. It also considered examples of co-funding strategies and of local and regional partnerships pooling resources together in order to offer training opportunities, in particular for SMEs.

3.1.6. The Commission identifies the SME sector as one in which the least training opportunities exist. Given the crucial role local and regional authorities play in supporting SMEs and boosting their growth potential, involving them in the development of access to training would help to effectively mobilize this target group and address the obstacles confronting their participation in training activities.

3.1.7. This area of focus is all the more important, given that SMEs account for the vast majority of enterprises in the EU and are generally identified as a sector creating the most job opportunities.

3.2. The production of regular reports from the Member States and the social and economic partners on access to continuing training enabling comparative assessment of progress achieved. Additional reports should include initiatives from local and regional authorities.

3.2.1. This would be welcomed as it would establish a frame of reference for development in this field. The COR calls for additional reports to be drawn up to include initiatives from local and regional authorities, as many promising initiatives are taken at local and regional level which otherwise might not receive due attention.

3.2.2. The COR recommends the establishment of a regional inter-institutional committee, with local participation, bringing together the social partners and public authorities and enabling those responsible for training to establish means and objectives for improving and facilitating access to workers' training, with a focus on specific sectors such as SMEs, women's training, small cooperatives and rural businesses.

3.3. The inclusion in the reports from the Member States of information forms for the most important initiatives in order to facilitate understanding in the other countries and enable further information to be obtained (including telephone numbers and e-mail addresses etc.).

3.3.1. As an important purpose of the reports from the Member States is to exchange experience and make the total of good ideas and initiatives known and inspiring within all of the EU countries, it is important that the initiatives are easily understood and can be followed-up for further information if necessary. If a simple form was filled in for the most important initiatives including a contact for further references, it might prevent an initiative being drowned in the overwhelming amount of information contained in all the national reports or being too briefly described in the joint report to serve its purpose.

3.4. The inclusion in the national reports of more information concerning the evaluations of the different initiatives, where this is available.

3.4.1. Again for the sake of maximum benefit in the exchange of experience, more information concerning evaluation, positive and negative, should be known to the other Member States, whenever they are available.

3.5. If another CVTS survey is made at a later time, public administration should be included in the survey as continuing training in this sector is as important as it is in private enterprises.

The COR stresses the importance in this respect of creating a good basis for developing further and continuing training in the public administration sector.

3.6. The establishment of an EU network disseminating best practice in promoting access to training in particular through local and regional partnerships.

3.6.1. The COR notes that though drawing up reports is very useful — with the time scale involved (around four years before the aggregated Europe-wide report is produced) — it is questionable how a real exchange of experience can be sustained on a continuous basis which is a prerequisite in furthering positive developments in this field. A framework for cooperation should therefore be established, this could be in the form of an EU network linking local and regional players and allowing interested parties to gain information on the latest and continually updated developments in this area. This would enable enterprises, in particular SMEs, to engage in training activities and thereby improve their competitiveness and productivity.

3.6.2. This network could also disseminate best practice to the countries of central and eastern Europe. It should be noted that there is no mention in the Commission's Report of reinforcing cooperation with the central and eastern European countries, though this could make an important contribution towards the reform process under way.

3.6.3. In consideration of budgetary constraints, rather than creating a new instrument, existing networks supported through the Leonardo programme and the Structural Funds could be used as a basis for the network, coordinated under a single framework and reinforced through a targeted initiative.

3.7. Higher priority should be given to continuing training and access to skills in the future Leonardo II programme in particular by promoting transnational pilot projects centering on new access factors such as work organization methods/working hours. In this respect, the COR underlines the need to simplify the administrative framework of the Leonardo programme.

3.7.1. Whilst the call for increased focus on supporting access to training is highly laudable, it is questionable whether this should be supported if it entails diminishing support for existing areas of activities within Leonardo, which seems likely if no additional budget is put forward.

3.8. A number of regional seminars to be held as a follow-up to this opinion and within the framework of the follow-up to the COR Opinion on 'The role of local

and regional authorities in linking education and training establishments to enterprises' in order to illustrate the European diversity and in order to gather concrete examples of best practice where local and regional authorities have been involved in promoting continuing training within the Member States. These authorities have also keenly encouraged the training of elected representatives and administrative staff so as to improve the services provided to the general public.

3.8.1. It is envisaged that the experiences presented at these seminars will be gathered in a written report and will further support the exchange of concrete examples and disseminate best practice among Member States, regions and localities.

3.9. The lines of action of the Commission should, moreover, include the development of the accreditation of skills and the European dimension of vocational training. Here, CEDEFOP could be called to make a contribution given the activities it is engaged in within this field.

#### 4. Conclusion

The COR:

4.1. strongly supports the increased focus on education and training in the Union and welcomes this initiative concerning access to continuing training succeeding the European year of lifelong learning;

4.2. would once again expressly draw attention to the fact that responsibility for the content and organization of continuing training, as part of vocational training, lies with the Member States; the Community has no regulatory powers to harmonize Member States' legal and administrative provisions in this field. By adopting a decentralized approach to vocational training it is possible to pursue a strategy geared to meeting specific requirements;

4.3. stresses the contribution made by the European year of lifelong learning, in which equal importance has been ascribed to the two facets of lifelong learning:

- employment and promotion of employability;
- the personal development of the individual and his/her place in society.

The COR insists on the need to highlight the role of continuing training as a policy conducive to boosting the individual's potential and role as active participant in his/her own vocational progression.



More generally, the policy of continuing vocational training must be clearcut in its pursuit of the aim of strengthening the individual's capacity to assimilate and enrich forward-looking developments in our society so as to give full expression to his/her citizenship.

The recent prioritization of continuing training in the European Union must be rooted in high-quality basic training — anchored in the principle of positive discrimination — so as to guarantee a continuing training policy which is open to everyone.

More generally, the links between basic and continuing training need to be strengthened in order to avoid rupture between the two systems and to facilitate the framing of a consistent, effective education and training policy.

In particular, this presupposes recognition of vocational experience and qualifications through the introduction of new arrangements for validating such assets;

4.4. believes that continuing training will be a decisive factor in enabling enterprises to become 'learning environments' and thus to compete successfully and create future employment. Technological development, globalization and demographic development bring new challenges to the business world and to local and regional authorities and necessitate extensive adjustment for business conditions and the labour market. The COR agrees with the Commission that major efforts are required to raise the access level to continuing training very significantly in order to meet these challenges;

4.5. calls on the Commission to include local and regional government representatives within the proposed consultation framework in order to develop conditions for facilitating access to training;

4.6. welcomes the many reports and analyses as these provide a good general overview and present many

excellent examples of best practice as regards access to continuing training. However, the COR calls for additional reports to be drawn up to include initiatives from local and regional authorities. Moreover, it underlines the importance of including information forms as well as providing information on evaluation within reports to ensure maximum benefit of exchange of experience;

4.7. calls for a future CVTS survey to include public administration within its analysis;

4.8. underlines the value of disseminating best practice in this field through local and regional seminars;

4.9. calls for CEDEFOP to be invited to make a contribution in particular concerning the development of the accreditation of skills and the European dimension of vocational training;

4.10. stresses that in order to establish a real exchange of experience on a continuous basis, a framework for cooperation and dissemination of best practice needs to be established. This would enable the positive developments taking place within the Member States in particular at local and regional level to be capitalized. It therefore recommends that the Commission introduce an EU network disseminating best practice, in promoting access to training in particular through local and regional partnerships. Involving local and regional authorities in this network would, moreover, lead to a coordinated education, training, industrial and employment policy which is of benefit not only to the business sector but to the whole locality and region;

4.11. points out that in consideration of budgetary constraints, rather than creating a new instrument, existing networks supported through the Leonardo programme and the Structural Funds could be used as a basis for the network, coordinated under a single framework and reinforced through a targeted initiative.

Brussels, 15 July 1998.

*The Chairman*  
*of the Committee of the Regions*  
Manfred DAMMEYER