

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education'

(2000/C 168/09)

On 29 February 2000, the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 April 2000. The rapporteur was Mr Rupp.

At its 372nd plenary session (meeting of 27 April 2000) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 108 votes to one with four abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The European pilot project on quality evaluation in school education was launched at the start of the 1997 school year and formally ended with a final conference in Vienna in November 1998.

101 secondary schools in 18 countries took part in the project (the EU Member States plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein).

The number of schools selected in each country was roughly in proportion to country size. Large countries each had nine schools in the project, medium-sized countries five and small countries two. The schools were selected by a national committee.

The European Commission (education, training and youth) has submitted a report in several parts on the implementation of the project entitled:

Quality evaluation in school education:

- Guide for the participating schools
- Practical guide to self-evaluation
- Interim report
- Final report.

1.1.1. In particular, the final report

- presents the project;
- describes the approaches adopted by the schools;
- evaluates the work of the schools;
- outlines monitoring at national level;
- considers the conditions of success of the pilot project;
- and sets out the prospects for the participating schools.

2. General comments

2.1. *The importance of high standards in education*

There is no doubt that quality of education is a key indicator both of the maturity and independence of each individual member of society, and of the social and economic effectiveness of that society itself.

Since the emergence of the modern state, the quality of education and cognitive and social skills (both individually and as a whole) have been the mainstay of a country's social fabric, prosperity and democracy.

'Knowledge itself is power!' — this tenet of performance-based civil society organisations and associations is more true now than ever before, although it should be noted that, in this context, education does not mean accumulating knowledge, but channelling knowledge to practical use.

2.1.1. Education and globalisation

The development of society and individual liberties makes it essential to ensure high standards of education to match the dynamic changes in industry, the job market, science, research and technology, politics and government administration. The aim must thereby be to promote and secure employability and to launch the process of lifelong learning. This is not only a matter for public education systems, but must also involve the family, non-school education providers and industry. However, the fact that the state is responsible for education makes it primarily a task for schools.

As globalisation advances apace, this can no longer hold good only for individual countries, but requires joint and above all coordinated action to ensure high standards of education and thus make major strides in fostering people's cross-border mobility and in the transfer of education.

2.1.2. A set of European educational norms

Assessing education and monitoring standards involves probing the content, scope, objectives and norms of education itself. In the final analysis — and with all due respect for national and cultural characteristics and individual countries' sovereignty — the EU too must seek to establish a set of European educational norms, along the lines of a European core curriculum, which provides the same guaranteed standards and level of quality assessment in all countries.

A common core curriculum underpinned by the highest possible educational standards not only creates an environment conducive to mobility and prosperity, but also ensures comparability of performance and thus equality of opportunity for individual citizens. Thus, it is set to become a cornerstone of democracy and the welfare state in Europe.

2.1.3. Performance-led quality

The quality of education relates to performance and thus performance review and performance control. Quality has to be measured against yardsticks and standards which have developed culturally and are laid down in curricula. For schools, quality assessment is nothing new; on the contrary, learning processes — and hence educational results — have continually been subject to performance review.

The novelty is, first of all, that educational standards — and the assessment thereof — are to be underpinned internationally across different school systems, thus making it possible to compare quality on a broad scale. Secondly, this is to take place against the backdrop of enhanced autonomy for individual schools, in other words in a decentralised educational environment.

2.1.4. Decentralising the way schools are run

External and internal evaluation are useful tools on this front. In addition, a new balance is being established between central control and decision-making powers decentralised downstream — ultimately to schools themselves. Benchmarks hold this system together. They are designed to secure comparable and — depending on the level of schooling — uniform standards in the quality of school education and thus the qualifications awarded by schools.

In this process, schools need lasting support. Various compensatory measures are required to enable schools to join a quality assurance scheme of this kind. Such support must be provided within the education sector and also — above all — through government budgetary policy. Adequate resources remain essential to high standards in education. The European Parliament and the Council should therefore press home this fact to the Member States.

2.1.5. Acceptability by those concerned

The success of any action to evaluate the quality of school education and training depends on the backing for such action by those concerned. In this context, that does not mean those responsible for schools at a political level (who make frequent reference to individual countries' cultural and thus educational independence), but rather those actually involved in teaching and learning — together with their organisations and trade unions — as well as families and local communities in schools' catchment areas. All of them need the requisite environment and broader scope for action in order to achieve and assess high standards of education.

Schemes designed to secure high standards and quality assessment in education will founder if they seek — solely on the basis of economic efficiency and without increasing resources — to boost performance while at the same time forcing individual schools to deal with the shortfall through structural changes under the banner of decentralisation. Educational establishments such as schools are not comparable with businesses any more than learning is comparable with industrial production processes.

High standards of European education are without doubt a key element in the future viability of the Community; as the explanatory memorandum to the recommendations rightly states, safeguarding these standards is a priority.

Hence, the recommendation is to be supported — both in principle and on most points of detail. Since the principle of voluntary cooperation and adaptation applies, it remains up to individual countries to decide whether they have the will to give their young people equality of opportunity across Europe and whether they are prepared to make the requisite financial resources available for that purpose. This is essential to secure Europe's position in the world.

2.2. Background to the current proposal for a recommendation

2.2.1. Securing high standards of education in schools is deemed to be a priority — hence the need to up the importance of education policy within the EU as a whole. We would endorse this view. The recommendation currently on the table could further that objective.

It is of course every teacher's priority to ensure high standards of instruction; however, the requisite resources must also be made available (see above).

The European pilot project on quality evaluation in school education can be regarded as a success. A key element in that success is the fact that the pilot project also put forward practical proposals for evaluation. It is thus a workable base on which to build a wider quality assurance scheme.

2.2.2. The European contribution to educational standards in the Community is compensatory in nature; it aims to support and supplement national education systems in specific ways so as to promote the development of a Europe-wide educational standard. That does not mean harmonising education, but rather fostering equal educational opportunities in the Community.

As the draft paper too points out, educational standards are not thereby set from the 'top down'. Rather, educational quality is a dynamic variable of social development which is influenced by other policy areas. This applies particularly to financing.

High standards of education cannot therefore be secured without adequate resources. On the contrary, lack of resources overburdens the players involved and the system itself; particularly in the light of increasing decentralisation, this undermines the acceptability of quality assessment schemes.

2.2.3. With regard to the school system, it should be noted that decentralisation and more direct responsibility offer a crucial educational opportunity to raise standards and boost efficiency.

This holds good provided the principle is applied that, by introducing more scope for decentralised, independent action, educational and school-related decisions are taken at the level at which they are to be implemented. In a democratic state, parliament naturally retains the right to scrutinise key decisions affecting the system as a whole. However, decentralisation is only beneficial where it does not result in the lower levels of the education system being compelled to manage shortcomings which they themselves are not in a position to resolve. This applies in particular to the provision of instruction, school equipment and the availability of teaching staff.

2.2.4. External and internal evaluation are the main tools of quality assessment. Of the two, priority must be given to internal evaluation, not least for reasons of decentralisation but also in line with the principle of democracy. This order of priorities does not detract from the value of external evaluation. However, any relevant EU scheme should focus on internal evaluation.

This means giving individual schools practical tools to assess and raise educational standards themselves. To this end, various incentives should be worked out in cooperation with the Member States in order to make the schemes acceptable enough so that all the relevant players are involved.

2.2.5. Compiling and keeping archive records of quality indicators and benchmarks can provide important support for the quality assessment of individual schools, since these provide a touchstone for comparison and an overview to back up internal evaluation. The establishment of an appropriate database, which is accessible to schools (educational servers),

must therefore be an integral part of the European educational quality assurance scheme.

3. Specific comments

3.1. *Basic points concerning the explanatory memorandum to the recommendation*

3.1.1. More resources have indeed been devoted to education in the countries concerned. In terms of the status of education, however, the absolute level of resources fails to give the full picture. Education spending must be considered in relation to gross domestic product. An improvement on this front alone indicates a genuine rise in education resources.

There is a direct link between education and employment. Better education also boosts people's chances of finding a job. However, education does not lead directly to employment. It can undoubtedly go a considerable way towards helping resolve difficulties in employment and social policy, but it is not in itself the solution. The capacity of education to resolve the problems of society as a whole must not be overrated.

Specific mention should be made here of the concept of 'lifelong learning': one period of training is no longer enough to cover people's entire working lives; ongoing and further training is required and the proper conditions need to be established for this.

3.1.2. Any action to secure high standards in education must provide specific, targeted support for (i) children and young people suffering from or at risk of disability and from disadvantaged social backgrounds and (ii) school drop-outs. It must be remembered here that, over the past few years, school drop-out rates have proved extremely resistant to a variety of educational support schemes. More action is needed — particularly additional measures at all levels of social policy — to help those concerned gain an adequate education and/or leave school with a qualification.

Given the growth in information technologies and current communications standards in industry, connecting schools to the Internet and providing (economic) support to facilitate pupil access are actually essential elements in boosting standards of education and fostering educational interchange.

3.1.3. It is emphatically underlined that raising educational standards means not only maximising knowledge, but also expanding social and emotional skills.

3.1.4. Any action taken under this recommendation can build on the successful 1997/1998 pilot project on quality evaluation in school education.

3.2. *Basic points concerning the individual recommendations*

3.2.1. Educational standards in schools must be maintained through transparent quality schemes and developed into a set of European educational norms. The aim is not only to provide training and vocational qualifications, but above all to improve people's way of life in terms of democratic involvement in civil society organisations and associations.

3.2.2. The number of schools able to learn from internal evaluation must be increased by a focused scheme comprising a variety of incentives designed to ensure that as 'good' schools carry on getting better, 'bad' schools do not carry on getting worse. Incentives for teachers, for instance, must include opportunities for promotion, advancement and further training. In turn, teachers must also offer their students incentives to perform well.

3.2.3. External evaluation must be carried out by specialised bodies using yardsticks which apply specifically to schools. A simple input-output method based on economic efficiency is inappropriate to quality control. The EU's educational indi-

cators are a key foundation and reference framework for evaluation. The same is also true of point 2 (b) of the proposal for a European Parliament and Council recommendation.

3.2.4. In the drive for success, it is essential to actively involve all players concerned; they must have an input at every stage of the assessment process.

3.2.5. Training courses on the methodology and application of self-evaluation of educational practice in schools should also include the mutual exchange of teachers and instructors who have a proven track record in this field. Such courses may be used both in initial teacher training and in external and in-house further teacher training as well.

3.2.6. Cooperation with the appropriate authorities must continually refer back to educational practice in schools and the teaching staff involved 'on the ground' in quality assurance.

3.2.7. In addition to the appropriate authorities, advances in expertise in this field in Europe must be made available to schools without delay, for example as part of the planned database.

Brussels, 27 April 2000.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
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