

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Decision Adopting the Third Phase of the Trans-European Cooperation Scheme for Higher Education — Tempus III (2000-2006)'⁽¹⁾

(1999/C 40/08)

On 1 October 1998 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee under Article 198 of the Treaty establishing the European Community on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 17 November 1998. The rapporteur working alone was Mr Rodríguez García Caro.

At its 359th plenary session on 2 and 3 December 1998 (meeting of 2 December) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 102 votes in favour, 8 votes against and 16 abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Tempus I*

1.1.1. Decision 90/233/EEC, adopted by the Council on 7 May 1990, brought into being the Tempus programme, establishing a trans-European mobility scheme for university studies. The Committee issued an opinion on the programme on 25 April 1990.

1.2. *Tempus II*

1.2.1. In accordance with Article 11 of the decision, in 1992 the Commission submitted an evaluation report and a proposal for a decision inaugurating the second phase of the programme.

The Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion on this at its plenary session held on 27 January 1993.

1.2.2. On 29 April 1993 the Council adopted Decision 93/246/EEC inaugurating the second phase of Tempus for the period 1994/1998.

1.2.3. In accordance with the provisions of Article 11 of the Decision, the Commission in 1996 submitted an evaluation report and a proposal for a decision amending the previous decision, adapting Tempus as from 1998.

The Economic and Social Committee's opinion on this decision was adopted at its July 1996 plenary session.

1.2.4. On 21 November 1996 the Council adopted Decision 96/663/EEC amending Decision 93/246/EEC and extending Tempus until 2000.

1.3. *Tempus III*

1.3.1. On 17 July 1998 the Commission submitted a proposal for a Council Decision for the third phase of the trans-European cooperation scheme for higher education (Tempus III) for the period 2000-2006 and referred it to the Economic and Social Committee for its opinion.

1.3.2. Throughout its life the Tempus programme has had two constant themes.

1.3.3. First, stress should be laid on the effort made to promote the development of education systems in the countries covered by the Phare and Tacis programmes, contributing to improved training in universities in the eligible countries and supporting actions to improve and reform the structures and management of higher education institutions.

1.3.4. Secondly, the Committee welcomes the way in which the Community business sector and universities have been brought closer to their counterparts in the countries participating in the Tempus programme. The active involvement of firms in the development of the programme has given it an enormous impetus, which should be borne in mind in future.

2. Proposal for a decision

2.1. Tempus III is aimed at the central and eastern European countries which have not been involved in the Socrates and Leonardo programmes. Basically, these are the countries which came late to the Tempus programme and the beneficiaries of the Tacis programme (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the new independent states and Mongolia).

2.2. Tempus III will take account of the needs common to the Tacis countries arising from the grave financial crisis which also affects the higher education

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 270, 29.8.1998, p. 9.

systems of the new independent states and Mongolia. Tempus will contribute to the efforts to provide access to new methods of education, to introduce new courses and provide essential equipment.

2.3. Without losing sight of the general problems affecting all these countries, Tempus will respond to the specific needs of states, promoting actions to meet the demand for improvement and progress in universities in the eligible countries.

2.4. With regard to the non-associated central and eastern European countries involved in the Phare programme, Tempus continues to be relevant by helping to reduce disparities between these countries and the EU Member States.

Actions will concentrate on four priority areas:

2.4.1. Giving the regional dimension a boost, by making universities a focus of regional solidarity.

2.4.2. Modernizing national and local administration by providing university training to civil servants.

2.4.3. Managing change in the context of national reforms of higher education.

2.4.4. Building on what has been achieved in the associated countries so that the results obtained in the course of the whole Tempus programme can be exploited by the countries participating in Tempus III.

2.5. Tempus is at present the only Community framework for the development of relations between universities in the EU and the countries covered by the programme.

Tempus thus needs to continue in order to build on the benefits already obtained through the higher education systems of the eligible countries.

2.6. Tempus needs to be extended in order to develop further the results of the Phare and Tacis programmes in higher education and to reinforce the improvements in the management of higher education as a key element of socio-political reform, and in order to consolidate university-industry cooperation in the broad sense of the term, as indicated in Act 3(b) of the Commission proposal⁽¹⁾, thus backing up

⁽¹⁾ b) 'industry' and 'company' cover all types of economic activity, irrespective of legal status, local 'authorities and public law bodies, autonomous business organizations, chambers of commerce and industry and/or their equivalents, professional associations, employers' and workers' organizations, and the training bodies of the institutions and organizations mentioned above (COM(1998) 454 final)'.

initiatives undertaken by the states as part of the process of reform.

2.7. The proposal for a decision states that the programme shall last for six years, beginning on 1 July 2000. An evaluation report is to be drawn up in 2004 which will include a proposal for adapting the programme after 2006.

2.8. The general objective of Tempus III is to promote specifically, within the objectives of the Phare and Tacis programmes dealing with the economic and social development of the eligible countries, the development of higher education systems via close cooperation with European Union partners.

2.9. Within this general framework, Tempus has specific objectives concerning the provision of assistance to higher education systems in order to:

— develop study programmes

— reform structures and institutions, including management

— develop specialized training.

3. Comments

3.1. *General comments*

3.1.1. The Committee welcomes the continuation of the programme to 2006. Education and training bring freedom and enable people to grow in knowledge, harmony and well-being, thus encouraging balanced social and sustained economic development.

Improving and reinforcing higher education and making it available to citizens is essential if people are to be able to face the future with optimism.

3.1.2. Universities can play an important role in the socio-economic development of the programme's eligible countries. To this end, the Committee believes that close and flexible links are needed between universities and firms (in the sense of entities made up of employers and workers) so that academic institutions will be worthwhile both on their own terms and as a necessary and dynamic support to the life of the state in which they are located, e.g. by promoting the active transfer of firms' know-how.

Universities, with the benefit of business expertise, must be well placed to observe society's higher education needs. The Committee therefore feels that the economic and social interest groups should be more closely involved in decisions on the implementation of the programme and the selection of projects.

3.1.3. The Committee does not share the view that associated central and eastern European countries should be excluded from Tempus on the grounds that they are already covered by the Socrates programme. Whilst acknowledging that it is illogical to be participating simultaneously in similar programmes, the Committee does not feel that this criterion should be applied as long as some states are further than others from the achievement of improvements in their education systems.

The objectives of Socrates do not include the development of the participants' higher education systems, and countries which still need to reinforce and improve this sector should be free to benefit from Tempus.

The Committee therefore urges the Commission and the Council to take account of this and to allow countries to transfer gradually from one programme to another in line with the need for reform and improvement of their higher education systems.

3.1.4. The Committee feels that the improvement of the higher education structures and institutions of the eligible countries is a priority task with a view to the socio-economic development of these states.

The management of higher education institutions requires the support of skilled professionals able to maximize the efficiency of universities and ensure that funds, which are always in short supply, are used to serve the aims of the institution.

To this end, the Committee feels that the common European projects covering activities aimed at improving the management of universities in the eligible countries should involve not only EU universities but also firms, with their management expertise.

3.1.5. The Committee endorses the part of the explanatory memorandum to the proposal for a decision dealing with the harnessing of solidarity in the part of ex-Yugoslavia participating in Phare.

One way of doing this is through the active participation of universities from areas which have experienced ethnic conflict in projects involving other universities from the same geographical region, whether in the EU or the associated states.

The Committee calls on the Commission, in developing the programme, to step up and give priority to this type of activity in order to bring citizens of these zones of conflict closer together.

3.1.6. The development of study programmes is one of the objectives of Tempus III. In a society approaching the third millennium in which material considerations are at the forefront of European citizens' minds a counterweight is needed to this excessively materialistic concept of development.

The Committee considers that actions for the development of education programmes, study plans and course design should not overlook the humanities, which can contribute to the re-establishment of solidarity and help bring people closer together.

3.1.7. At the same time as promoting reform of education systems via the common European projects, we should not lose sight of the need for continuous qualitative improvement in higher education institutions.

The reforms may be insufficient unless underpinned by an awareness of the need for continuous improvement of the product offered to society. The Committee feels that the projects should include activities aimed at the continuous improvement of quality in higher education.

The Committee recommends that, in selecting common European projects, priority be given to measures for the establishment of quality guarantee systems in the universities and in study plans and programmes.

3.1.8. The Committee feels that special emphasis should be placed on improving the presentation and take-up of common European projects, which would require measures for the training and retraining of university teachers in the eligible countries and periods of secondment to EU firms. In order to guarantee high-quality university education, well-trained teachers are needed with access to advances in knowledge.

3.2. *Specific comments*

3.2.1. For the avoidance of confusion, the Committee feels that the terminology of the body of the text of the proposal for a decision should be harmonized with that of the appendices. Thus, the definition of the states covered by Tempus as 'eligible countries' (Article 2) should also be used in the appendix, in order to differentiate them from associated countries.

3.2.2. One of the objectives of Tempus I was to promote reciprocal language-learning opportunities between the Member States and the eligible countries.

The Committee notes that this is not listed among the objectives of the third phase of Tempus, nor is it included in the development of programme activities. The Committee feels that, language being the natural vehicle of communication, there will be no mutual understanding without a common means of expression.

Reciprocal language-learning opportunities should therefore be reincorporated into the third phase of Tempus, with support for the training of language teachers.

3.2.3. The programme's support for student mobility between universities is one of the programme's most positive features in that it promotes the interchange of culture and knowledge in a barrier-free Europe based on solidarity.

The Committee welcomes the priority which the programme attaches to projects for the mutual recognition of courses undertaken in other universities. This priority selection criterion should be made general and be a key element in the decision to support a project so that interchange and mobility will be encouraged and study periods in other universities made more attractive.

3.2.4. In its previous opinions on the programme the Committee has repeatedly advocated that one of the two seats on the advisory committee reserved for each Member State be occupied by a university representative and the other by a representative of industry. In view of the emphasis placed by the programme on activities to promote cooperation between universities and the economic and social players, particularly industry, the Committee feels that it would be prudent to give the latter a voice on the advisory committee.

Under the third phase of Tempus, however, the seats on the advisory committee are reduced to one per Member State.

Whilst fully aware of the arguments in favour of economy, the Committee wonders whether it might not actually be more cost-effective to sacrifice this principle and thus enable the committee to perform more efficiently the functions assigned to it by the proposal for a decision.

The Committee would therefore call for the number of seats to remain at two per Member State, shared between the university and socio-economic worlds, in order to help the committee meet the objectives for which it was set up.

3.2.5. The experience, both positive and negative, accumulated over the life of the Tempus programme can be used in planning future developments. There should be specific support under Tempus III for publicising the results of projects and activities carried out under the programme over the years in order to provide

institutions and bodies wishing to participate with a reference framework in drawing up common European projects.

New participants in the programme need both a guide for applicants, clearly setting out all the conditions of the programme, and a guide to past projects, with details of participants, enabling experience garnered from past projects to be used to improve the quality of future Tempus projects.

3.2.6. Improving national and local public administration in the eligible countries is a priority for the states covered by the Phare and Tacis programmes. Civil servants need to upgrade their skills in order to meet new management demands arising from the reforms being undertaken.

The universities of the eligible countries can play an important part in the retraining of civil servants by making their infrastructure available and enlisting the support of universities in the Member States and associated countries in order to design an appropriate model for the continuing training of the eligible countries' civil servants.

The Committee feels that these training activities should be given greater weight within the programme and the objectives spelt out more clearly in the appendix.

3.2.7. The Committee feels that activities aimed at improving the training of the economic and social players in the eligible countries (training of trade union and employers' representatives) should be taken into account in developing programmes for promoting the reform of socio-economic systems in these states. The states' participation in these programmes should be on the basis of equality.

3.2.8. The Committee recommends that, in publicising the information needed to encourage participation in the programme, maximum transparency be practised. More higher education institutions and firms from the Member States need to be involved in Tempus projects in order to prevent stagnation, and new ideas and approaches should be embraced, thus enriching the substantial body of experience already accumulated over the life of the programme.

Brussels, 2 December 1998.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Beatrice RANGONI MACHIAVELLI

APPENDIX

to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee

The following amendments, which received at least one quarter of the votes cast, were defeated during the discussion:

Point 3.1.2, first paragraph

Replace '... firms (in the sense of ...)' by: 'economic and social interest groups'.

Result of the vote

For: 54, against: 59, abstentions: 9.

Point 3.1.2, second paragraph

In the first sentence, replace 'with the benefit of business expertise' by 'with the benefit of the expertise of the economic and social interest groups'.

Result of the vote

For: 47, against: 63, abstentions: 6.

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Regulation (EC) applying a multiannual scheme of generalized tariff preferences for the period 1 January 1999 to 31 December 2001'

(1999/C 40/09)

On 2 December 1998 the Economic and Social Committee, acting in pursuance of Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for External Relations, which was instructed to draw up the section's opinion on the matter, adopted its opinion on 17 November 1998. The rapporteur was Mr Giesecke.

The Committee adopted the opinion set out below at its 359th plenary session (meeting of 2 December 1998) by a unanimous vote.

1. Introduction

1.1. Over the last few decades, the EU has constantly improved and adjusted its policy on trade preferences for developing countries in the light of recent developments; the EU has, however, taken care not to leave its own sensitive economic sectors unprotected. The EU has sought to take account more effectively of the differing needs of the various groups of developing countries, whilst, however, also paying greater heed to the interests of EU importers.

1.2. The latest major revision of the GSP came into force in 1995, marked by the beginning of a new ten-year period of EU tariff arrangements. This revision brought further progress on transparency and predictability, for

governments in developing countries and also importers who wish to focus on transparent markets.

1.3. A new development was the provision whereby good conduct on the part of individual developing countries in the fields of labour law, protection of the environment and anti-drug measures could be specially rewarded; another new provision was the graduation mechanism under which advanced developing countries gradually ceased to benefit from preferences.

1.4. A number of additional improvements and adjustments are now being proposed three years into the new period covered by the Community offer.