

Draft Conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on efficiency and equity in education and training

(2006/C 298/03)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES, MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL,

HAVING REGARD to:

1. the strategic goal set for the European Union by the Lisbon Council of 23-24 March 2000, 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' and the mandate of the Lisbon Council to the Education Council to undertake 'a general reflection on the concrete future objectives of education systems, focusing on common concerns and priorities while respecting national diversity' ⁽¹⁾;
2. the report of the Education Council of 12 February 2001 on 'The concrete future objectives of education and training systems' submitted to the European Council in Stockholm on 23 and 24 March 2001 setting out three strategic objectives and thirteen associated objectives ⁽²⁾;
3. the first and second strategic objectives of the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme, 'Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU' — including its associated objective 'Making the best use of resources' ⁽³⁾ — and 'Facilitating the access to all to education and training systems' — including its associated objectives 'Open learning environment' and 'Supporting active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion';
4. the Commission communication of 10 January 2003 on 'Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe', which calls for 'a substantial increase in investment in human resources' and for 'spending existing resources more efficiently' ⁽⁴⁾;
5. the Council conclusions of 5 May 2003 on Reference Levels of European Average Performance in Education and Training (Benchmarks) which stressed that 'the Council has agreed to establish a series of reference levels of European average performance ... which will be used as one of the tools for monitoring the implementation' of the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme ⁽⁵⁾;
6. the joint interim report of the Council and the Commission of 26 February 2004 on the implementation of the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme, which emphasises the 'urgent need to invest more, and more efficiently and effectively in human resources' and calls for 'a higher level of public sector investment ... and, where appropriate, a higher level of private investment, particularly in higher education, adult education and continuing vocational training' ⁽⁶⁾;
7. the joint interim report of the Council and the Commission of 23 February 2006 on the implementation of the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme, which underlines that giving equal consideration to the efficiency, quality and equity objectives of the education and training systems is a 'sine qua non of achieving the Lisbon goals while strengthening the European social model' and that 'there is no trade-off between efficiency and equity' and further that 'in particular, investment in pre-primary education is of paramount importance for preventing school failure and social exclusion' ⁽⁷⁾;
8. the conclusions of the Spring European Council of 23-24 March 2006, which stressed that 'education and training are critical factors to develop the EU's long-term potential for competitiveness, as well as for social cohesion', that 'reforms must ... be stepped up to ensure high quality education systems which are both efficient and equitable' and that 'investments in education and training produce high returns which substantially outweigh the costs and reach far beyond 2010' ⁽⁸⁾;
9. the Commission communication on 'Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems' ⁽⁹⁾ which invites the Member States to develop a culture of evaluation and which, having been prepared in collaboration with research networks, represents a positive step towards the further development of evidence-based policy in education and training.

⁽¹⁾ Presidency conclusions, Lisbon European Council, 23-24 March 2000 (doc. SN 100/1/00 REV 1).

⁽²⁾ 'The concrete future objectives of education and training systems' — Report from the Education Council to the European Council (doc. 5980/01).

⁽³⁾ Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe (OJ C 142, 14.6.2002).

⁽⁴⁾ 'Investing efficiently in education and training: an imperative for Europe' — Commission Communication (doc. 5269/03).

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 134, 7.6.2003, p. 3.

⁽⁶⁾ "Education & Training 2010": the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms' — Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe (doc. 6905/04).

⁽⁷⁾ 'Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe' — 2006 joint interim report of the Council and of the Commission on progress under the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme (OJ C 79, 1.4.2006, p. 1).

⁽⁸⁾ Presidency conclusions, Brussels European Council, 23/24 March 2006 (doc. 7775/06).

⁽⁹⁾ 'Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems' — Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament (doc. 12677/06).

NOTE that

education and training are fields for the relevant authorities in individual Member States to organise and resource in accordance with national legislation, policies and practices. At the same time, however, there is a need for European cooperation in order to learn from one another's experiences and good practices, and for indicators and benchmarks in order to follow progress. Successful education and training policies in a lifelong learning context require a cross-sectoral approach in conjunction with other relevant policies, especially those in the fields of research and innovation, employment, economic affairs, social and health care, youth and culture.

STATE that

1. education and training, as essential contributors to democracy, social cohesion and sustainable economic growth, should be seen as a priority investment for the future. The challenge for Member States within their lifelong learning strategies is to identify those priorities for education investments that will impact most efficiently on the quality and equity of learning outcomes;
2. improving efficiency and equity in education and training is crucial in the face of the challenges posed by globalisation, demographic changes, rapid technological developments and increasing pressure on public budgets. Despite the tight constraints on public spending, there is widespread recognition of the need to ensure adequate — and where appropriate increased — funding for human resources and therefore to consider how to increase and/or make the best use of private contributions;
3. inequities in education and training systems, resulting in outcomes such as low levels of achievement, school drop-outs and early school leaving, engender heavy hidden social costs for the future which can far outweigh the investments made. The development of efficient and equitable high quality education and training systems contributes significantly towards reducing the risks of unemployment, social exclusion and wasted human potential in a modern knowledge-based economy;
4. quality is a common objective for all forms of education and training in the European Union and should be regularly monitored and evaluated. Quality is not only a matter of learning outcomes or delivery of tuition, but also of how well education and training systems cater for individual, social and economic needs, as well as of strengthening equity and improving well-being;
5. the motivation, skills and competences of teachers, trainers, other teaching staff and guidance and welfare services, as well as the quality of school leadership, are key factors in achieving high quality learning outcomes. The efforts of teaching staff should be supported by continuous professional development and by good cooperation with parents, pupil welfare services and the wider community. In addition, high quality teaching and learning environments ensure good conditions for learning and contribute to positive learning outcomes;
6. research evidence has shown that in the long term pre-primary education and targeted early intervention programmes can bring the highest rates of return over the whole lifelong learning process, especially for the most disadvantaged. They produce positive human and socio-economic results that carry over into further education and adulthood. Whilst respecting the responsibility of the Member States for organising their education and training systems, there is also some research evidence to suggest that, in certain cases, differentiating pupils at too early an age into separate schools of different types on the basis of ability may have negative effects on the achievements of disadvantaged pupils;
7. as learning communities, educational institutions should focus on the wider learning environment in order to promote and maintain efficiency, equity and general well-being. Special measures are needed to identify and support pupils with special educational needs. These measures include ensuring sufficient numbers of specially trained teaching and guidance staff together with a high standard of pupil welfare services and adequate resources. Although the cross-sectoral co-operation needed for early intervention and other special measures aimed at ensuring equity in education and training inevitably entail additional costs, in the long term they pay dividends by helping to avoid future costs resulting from exclusion;
8. improving access to upper secondary level education and reducing rates of early school leaving are crucial for increasing the employability of individuals in a modern knowledge-based society and for fostering social inclusion and active citizenship, as well as for strengthening the European social model. As the labour market demand for skills rises, it is increasingly important to give the younger generation access to qualifications and skills, thereby improving their prospects for employment and social integration;
9. the need to modernise Europe's universities, given their interlinked roles in the fields of education, research and innovation, has been recognised not only as a pre-condition for the success of the broader Lisbon Strategy, but also as part of a general move towards an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy. The growth in

student numbers and cost of high-quality education and research will require increased and/or more effective use of both public and private resources. High quality higher education also has a key role to play in education and training as a whole, by educating future teaching staff and updating and renewing the whole knowledge base of education;

10. vocational education and training have a significant impact on employment and social integration. Ensuring relevant, high quality qualifications for young people and improving the skills and competences of the low-skilled and disadvantaged groups bring substantial economic gains, even in the short term. Competence-based qualifications frameworks and other mechanisms for recognising prior learning promote efficiency and equity by taking into account non-formal and informal learning outcomes in addition to formal qualifications. Encouraging partnerships between stakeholders — including the social partners and sectoral organisations — could also enhance the effectiveness and attractiveness of vocational education and training programmes.

11. rapid technological development together with changes in the demographic structure of Europe make it necessary to invest more in updating and upgrading the skills, qualifications and key competences of adults, especially the low-skilled. In the short term, targeting investments on updating and upgrading existing skills and competences of the labour force is a rapid way of contributing towards economic growth and competitiveness, and of discouraging early retirement of the ageing work force. Adult learning also has a key role to play in providing new key competences, such as digital literacy, and thus contributing towards greater social inclusion and active participation in community and society, including after retirement;

cularly by focusing on pre-primary education, targeted early intervention programmes and equitable education and training systems that are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes which are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage. In addition, the provision of high quality teaching in disadvantaged areas should be particularly encouraged.

3. ensure adequate funding for human resources and, where appropriate, increase public funding and encourage greater complementary private contributions, in order to secure more equitable access to higher education. The modernisation of the higher education and research sectors is also important to improve their efficiency. Consideration should also be given to fostering collaborative links with business in areas of research and development;

4. ensure adequate funding of adult education and continuing vocational education and training, and encourage active partnerships with employers in order to focus on the skills needs of the economy, including at regional and local levels;

5. encourage research into the outcomes of education reforms and investments and into the social benefits resulting from them. Coherent, relevant, reliable, evidence-based information is the basis for accountability as well as for taking the action needed to achieve quality, equity and efficiency throughout the education and training system. At the same time, monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance should provide objective and transparent feedback and support for the development of teaching and learning methods and practice;

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES to

1. further consider whether the present arrangements for funding, governing and managing their education and training systems adequately reflect the need to ensure both efficiency and equity, and so make optimum use of resources. With that in view, they are invited to examine possible ways of improving the present arrangements, in order to avoid the hidden but high costs of educational inequity;

2. ensure the efficient targeting of education and training reforms and investment, both in the long term and the short term, in order to meet the needs of the knowledge-based society through improved quality and equity, parti-

INVITE THE COMMISSION AND THE MEMBER STATES to

1. work together with the relevant research networks, in order to provide more comprehensive and integrated analyses in support of education and training reforms and, where appropriate, develop internationally comparable indicators on the efficiency and equity of education and training systems;

2. encourage and support research into the social and economic impact of education and training reforms and investments both at national and international level. There is a need for more research, particularly in sectors that are not currently sufficiently researched — such as pre-primary education, vocational training, lifelong learning and the economics of education, in particular the impact of private contributions;

3. make use of relevant research results and existing data to combine quality, equity and efficiency dimensions in the preparation of both the 'Education & Training 2010' national reports and the 2008 joint interim report, as well as in relation to a possible proposal for common objectives for European education and training systems and their promotion beyond 2010;
 4. design and implement peer-learning activities in the field of efficiency and equity in the framework of the 'Education & Training 2010' work programme;
 5. make appropriate use of the Lifelong Learning Programme, the Structural Funds and the Seventh Research Framework Programme to support the efficiency and equity aspects of education and training systems.
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