Opinion on the proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning

(95/C 210/11)

On 14 October 1994 the Council decided to consult the Committee of the Regions, under Article 198c of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Commission on Education and Training, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its Opinion on 24 October 1994. The Rapporteur was Ms Helene Lund.

At its 5th plenary session (meeting of 15-16 November 1994) the Committee of the Regions adopted the following Opinion unanimously.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Committee of the Regions (COR) welcomes the Commission's proposal to declare 1996 the European Year of Lifelong Learning.

1.2. The COR endorses the emphasis placed by the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, on investment in education and training for the purpose of solving the EU's economic and employment problems and preserving and adapting the European model of society.

1.3. The cooperation of local and regional authorities is vital to the implementation of the White Paper's ideas on lifelong learning. They should therefore take a closer look at what can be done on the local and regional fronts to promote this European Year.

1.4. Local and regional authorities can play a key role, particularly in two areas relating directly to the aims of the White Paper and the European Year, by:

— promoting cooperation — at all levels — between education systems and undertakings (especially SMEs), since education is an integral component of local development strategies; information networks of good practice at local and regional level would be invaluable in these business partnerships;

— fostering the creation of a 'European education and training area' since education is an integral component of citizenship training.

1.5. Accordingly, the COR considers that local and regional authorities should back this major Commission venture. At the same time, however, it would not want to see the Year's emphasis on large spectacular events to be the only impact. It would want to see a programme of information and exchange networks of good practice which would have lasting value.

1.6. This would ensure that the European Year achieves tangible results; the COR would therefore set its priority so as to enable creative activities. The COR would wish to see part of the funding used to set up a Pan-European information network for dissemination of good practice and exchange of information and experience, for example in the area of access and use of information technology and distance learning not only in urban areas but also within rural development projects. Setting this priority would facilitate creative activities bearing out the value of lifelong education and the lessons learned can then be passed on to other parts of the EU.

1.7. Projects which are wholly funded from the Community budget should concentrate on the areas mentioned in Articles 126 and 127 of the EC Treaty which are covered by Community support programmes in the field of education.

2. Education — relevance for regional and local development

2.1. The White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment regards local development strategies as most important in promoting growth and job creation. Here the key principles are close strategic cooperation between the public and private sectors and the key role played by education policy in labour market and trade policies.

2.2. The division of responsibility for education among the various territorial authorities differs substantially among the EU Member States; in some countries responsibility for educational matters is concentrated entirely at central government level; but in others responsibility for education and training including primary and secondary education has been decentralized and devolved to local and regional authorities. On the whole local and regional authorities in the EU nonetheless shoulder a substantial share of responsibility for the education of children and young people.

2.3. Local and regional authorities have an interest in education on four fronts:

— as education authorities, since many local and regional authorities are responsible for both general education and vocational training;

— as employers, they have a direct interest in upgrading the skills of their own staff;

— as social authorities, they are responsible for providing those most in need with the qualifications necessary to find employment as new job opportunities arise — thereby helping to combat social exclusion;

— as territorial authorities, they also have an interest in upgrading the labour force's skills because of the direct link between higher qualifications and new product development which can lay the foundations for growth and generate more jobs in the area concerned.

2.4. Local and regional authorities already play a key role, in some countries the essential role — or may do so in the future — through their involvement in:

— the allocation of resources for local education;

— ensuring that resources are deployed as effectively as possible (through cooperation between public and private educational establishments);

— organizing cooperation between the local labour market and the educational establishments.

2.5. Cooperation on a partnership basis between educational establishments, businesses and local and regional authorities can, for instance, be organized within the framework of local educational centres or education boards.

2.6. The COR therefore calls on the Commission to consider the following proposals:

— Implementation of pilot schemes to enable local partnerships to exchange experiences and establish networks of good practice in connection with 'education as an integral part of local development strategies'.

— The convening of a European conference in connection with Lifelong Learning Year 1996 in order to focus attention on the links between study leave and job rotation schemes and lifelong learning.

3. Education and democracy/citizenship

3.1. In the COR's view, the European Year must be rooted in the broadest possible definition of education and training and an open approach to new training and information technologies. The focus must not be solely on vocationally-oriented education and training, but encompass the concept of 'learning for life' by seeking to harness new technologies to that end.

3.2. The actions must not be confined to economic aspects. It is more important that they cater for education and training with a European dimension. Education and training in this sense should be the personal development of every individual. It should instil in them the basic values of private, social and civic life, such as solidarity, tolerance and understanding for cultural diversity. Education and training should also foster the ability to communicate between different cultural groups and to take part in democratic decision-making processes.

3.3. The overriding aim of a democratic society must be to enable the individual to develop and express his/her human potential. Local and regional authorities are therefore faced with a major challenge in assuming responsibility for the education of all citizens within their ambit. This aim tallies with for example that of the 'Educating Cities' campaign being conducted by the CLRAE.

3.4. This presupposes that everyone has access not only to education but also to information of all kinds so as to be able to form his/her own impression. However, this goal is empty and futile unless backed simultaneously by an all-out drive to tackle the problem of functional illiteracy.

3.5. This is not just a matter of giving a qualitative boost to general education and ensuring transparency in the education system. The possibilities inherent in alternative forms of education also need to be explored in the form, for instance, of open education/open university linked up with local radio, possibly with local business sponsorship. A wide range of partners must be mobilized. Local libraries, for instance, play a key role in providing democratic access to information.

4. Role played by libraries

4.1. As mentioned above, local libraries make a major contribution in ensuring democratic access to information — both for citizens and for businesses, via commercial services specially targeted at SMEs.

4.2. At the same time libraries are steadily becoming more and more important in the education sector: a number of courses (e.g. those specifically aimed at young

people) do not, unlike the universities, have their own library facilities.

4.3. The information on offer is increasingly based on new technology. For libraries to be able to supply the citizen with such information, the copyright problems inherent in the loan of electronic aids must therefore be settled.

4.4. The COR therefore calls on the Commission to request the Member States to grant training to all citizens to be able to use electronically-based information and to ensure free library loans, e.g. arrangements whereby the public authorities buy the copyright.

5. Function and role of out-of-school education as part of lifelong learning

5.1. Colleges providing youth and adult education courses are a linchpin of democratic and cultural education in the Northern European countries. However, information groups also have considerable capacity to educate all age groups, at all levels and in every possible sector. This is of particular relevance to facilitating the entry and re-entry of women into the labour market.

5.2. The role and function of out-of-school education as part of lifelong learning could therefore be one of the subjects to be discussed in connection with the European Year, possibly in the form of a European conference or support for network cooperation and pilot projects.

5.3. Here one major target will be to harness the potential in the EU's most developed countries to promote development in less-developed EU countries.

6. The democratization process in Eastern and Central Europe

6.1. Concurrently the link between democracy and education is particularly significant because the Eastern and Central European countries with which the EU has concluded association agreements are also eligible to take part in the European Year.

6.2. The COR therefore urges the Commission to consider:

— appropriate forms of action for relaying experiences in 'education as an integral part of citizenship training' to the Eastern and Central European countries;

— funding different models of professional development schemes for teachers, administrators, librarians and others, in the countries of Western, Central and Eastern Europe with detailed evaluation on a Pan-European level.

7. Young people and educational barriers

7.1. Lifelong learning must start already in childhood and adolescence. Young people who lose out run a serious risk of never achieving an educational grounding which can ensure a job and/or quality of life.

7.2. As regards young people, the most urgent task is the introduction of an EU-wide youth scheme guaranteeing all young people (under the age of 18) a place in the education system or a combination of practical work and education, as proposed in the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment.

7.3. For the education system to succeed in 'catching' young people, the motto is 'accessibility, diversity and flexibility', viz. education must be:

— free of charge;

— offer a wide variety of options and combinations;

— readily accessible, with few restrictions.

7.4. However, it is not sufficient to make education accessible. One major task is to break down various social and cultural barriers to education for all young people. One of the most serious obstacles is lack of motivation, since it is among the most difficult to tackle, especially in a climate of widespread unemployment. Experience has shown that educational barriers can be overcome most successfully by linking education and training to meaningful job prospects.

7.5. To ensure that as many people as possible complete a basic course of education — and do not land up as school 'drop-outs' - it is important to find alternative course options for those who do not fit into the traditional education system; these could include special youth-oriented courses and schools offering a wide range of subjects, with teachers from differing educational backgrounds. At the same time it is important for alternative courses to form part and parcel of the established education system, in the sense that they too provide a qualification.

7.6. Young people's own initiatives should also be supported since such schemes can provide them with vital general qualifications and experience (e.g. creativity, problem-solving, flexibility, helpfulness and capacity to 'work against the clock').

7.7. The COR recommends that the European Year highlights:

— the stimulation and education of young people who cannot be accommodated in the traditional education system;

— educational barriers.

8. **Education and particularly vulnerable groups**

8.1. Another matter to which special attention should be paid is the education of particularly vulnerable groups, such as disabled persons or immigrants and refugees.

8.2. To encourage the concept of 'independent living' among people with disabilities, it will be necessary to make technology available to aid communication, in order to network.

8.3. The COR calls on the Commission to consider the following proposals:

— The implementation of an action programme to combat racism and xenophobia, which encompasses information networks and cooperation on the exchange of experiences and the transfer of good practice.

— Setting-up of networks for the exchange of experiences and the transfer of good practice in the teaching of disabled persons, including special tuition for disabled children in elementary schools and programmes to integrate disabled adults in education and employment.

— Setting-up of networks for the exchange of experiences and the transfer of good practice in the teaching of immigrants and refugees, to include projects to help them integrate into nursery and elementary schooling, as well as education and employment programmes and projects for adult immigrants and refugees.

9. **Schools and the European dimension in education**

9.1. As stressed in point 7.1, lifelong learning must start already in childhood. At elementary school level, for instance, the idea of 'friendship schools', i.e. computer-linked cooperation between schools in different European countries, should obviously be extended. That presupposes the introduction of information technology and reinforcement of foreign language teaching in schools. This is an area in which both the EU and local and regional authorities should show a stronger commitment and build on experience within the Member States and the Council of Europe.

10. **Lifelong learning also extends to older persons**

10.1. Conversely, lifelong learning does not end on retirement. Local and regional authorities face a clear challenge to provide local classes for older persons (e.g. universities for senior citizens) and involve them in the democratic decision-making process in their local community, for instance through their own special councils.

10.2. However, older persons, as well as early retired persons, also have a wealth of wisdom and experience to pass on to the younger generations. The COR therefore suggests that advantage be taken of this European Year to focus attention on the importance of oral traditions — the art of story telling — in the cultural and democratic education of children and young people. This could be achieved by:

— Reviving the art of story telling by inviting the elderly to go into schools to talk about, for example, folklore or their experiences from the Second World War, with direct reference to current problems of racism and xenophobia.

— The production of a European video featuring stories by older people, for use in school education throughout Europe.

11. **Concluding remark**

In order to face the challenges of the 21st century which lie before us and develop a new model for growth, competitiveness and employment in which education and training play a key role, in accordance with the guidelines of the White Paper, the COR calls on the European Union, within the framework of the European Year of Lifelong Learning to:

— give support to the objective of putting an end to the waste of talent and resources by granting access to education to all, regardless of difference in gender, ethnic and economic and social background and thereby to contribute towards combating social exclusion and eliminating regional disparities.

Done at Brussels, 16 November 1994.

The President

of the Committee of the Regions

Jacques BLANC