Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning'

(2005/C 164/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning (COM(2004)474 final — 2004/0153 (COD));

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 15 July 2004 to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 and Article 149 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its President of 5 April 2004 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to its draft opinion CdR 258/2004 rev. 2 adopted on 7 December 2004 by its Commission for Culture and Education, (Rapporteur: **Ms Christina Tallberg**, Member of Stockholm County Council (SE-PES);

and in consideration of:

the Communication from the Commission on the new generation of Community education and training programmes after 2006 (COM(2004) 156 final);

the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on Building our common future: policy challenges and budgetary means of the enlarged Union 2007-2013 (COM(2004) 101 final).

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 58th plenary session, held on 23-24 February 2005 (meeting of 23 February).

General background

The Commission has drafted a proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning, comprising a number of sectoral/specific programmes. The integrated programme builds on the current Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes, the eLearning programme, the Europass initiative and the various actions funded through the Community action programme.

The proposal focuses on issues that are of importance to regional and local politics i.e. the grassroots level, and is therefore of great interest to the Committee of the Regions. However, the Commission proposal deals almost exclusively with the EU and national level. The document refers only fleetingly to the local and regional level and its importance for participation in developing and implementing the programme in Europe.

According to Eurostat figures (2001), an average 19.6 % of young Europeans aged 18 and 24 do not show up in the further education and training figures, and 20 %-30 % of school leavers do not undertake any further education or training, be it vocational or general.

Member State education ministers and their counterparts in 14 other European countries established in the Bologna Declaration (19 June 1999) that the European higher education sector must acquire a global appeal to match Europe's great cultural and scientific achievements.

In accordance with the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council (March 2000), the European Council meeting in Feira called on the Member States, the Council and the Commission to establish uniform strategies and practical measures to promote lifelong learning for all.

With this in mind, the Commission adopted its Memorandum on lifelong learning, with a view to launching a Europe-wide debate on a comprehensive strategy to achieve lifelong learning at individual and institutional level, and in all areas of public and private life. The approach taken to European education puts the emphasis on individual learning.

When European ministers with responsibility for higher education met in Prague on 19 May 2001, they stressed, *inter alia*, the importance of making European higher education more attractive to students from Europe and other parts of the world.

The European Council meeting in Stockholm (March 2001) fixed the objectives for European education and training systems. The Council established the following priority development areas for the implementation of the Education 2010 work programme: access to guidance, quality assurance of services, the role of guidance in the development of human resources and guidance to facilitate mobility for study and employment in Europe. The Barcelona European Council (2002) drew up a work programme to achieve these objectives.

The proposal is a follow-up to the Commission Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening Cooperation with third countries in the field of higher education (COM(2001) 385 final)).

The White Paper on a New impetus for European Youth addresses young people's need for a flexible guidance and advice system to support continuing access to lifelong and lifewide learning.

In 2002 the Commission decided to make the European area for lifelong learning a reality. One of the practical results, which the Commission achieved in cooperation with the Committee of the Regions, was 'Learning Regions' (Regional networks for lifelong learning — R3L programme). The project brings together 120 regions in 17 networks and aims to develop comprehensive strategies for lifelong learning.

In its Communication on European Union education programmes post 2006, the Commission announces its plans for new EU programmes including a new integrated programme for transnational mobility and lifelong learning cooperation for the EU Member States, EEA/EFTA countries and the applicant countries. The programme covers both general education and vocational training.

The joint interim report presented by the Council and the Commission on Education and Training 2010 addresses essential reforms for the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy and highlights three priority areas: concentrating reforms and investment on the key areas of the Information Society, Making lifelong learning a reality, and Building a Europe of education and training. A new interim report is expected for 2006.

In November 2004 Wim Kok, chairman of the High-Level Group for the mid-term review, submitted his Lisbon Strategy progress report. One of the report's conclusions is that progress on the declared objectives is far too slow. The proposal for an integrated action programme for lifelong learning should also be seen in this context. The local and regional level have great potential to make an active contribution towards achieving the objectives in the field of education.

The Committee of the Regions has on various occasions stressed the need for lifelong learning efforts to be firmly anchored at local and regional level. In view of the importance of this issue to the way society is organised at local and regional level, the Committee of the Regions would like to play an active role in developing and implementing the lifelong learning initiative.

Gist of the proposal

The integrated programme

The new rules cover a new integrated education and training programme for mobility, and lifelong learning cooperation projects and network building. It comprises the following:

1) **The sectoral programmes**:

   — **Comenius**, for general education activities concerning schools up to and including upper secondary level;

   — **Erasmus**, for education and advanced training activities at higher education level;

   — **Leonardo da Vinci**, for all other aspects of vocational education and training; and

   — **Grundtvig**, for adult education.

2) **A general/transversal programme** incorporates four key activities:

   — Community cooperation on lifelong learning policy;

   — paying particular attention to language learning;

   — developing ICT-related activities when these extend beyond specific programmes;

   — improving dissemination.

3) A **Jean Monnet programme** to support action related to European integration and European institutions and associations in education and training.

Target levels

The lifelong learning and vocational training programme is expected to cost circa EUR 13,620 billion over seven years. The budget centres on **four key goals** set out in the financial perspective for 2007-2013.

The overall objective is to help to make the Community an advanced knowledge-based society through lifelong learning. The four specific programmes are as follows:

— 1 in 20 school pupils involved in Comenius actions 2007–2013;

— 3 million Erasmus students by 2011;

— 150,000 annual Leonardo placements by 2013;

— 25,000 annual Grundtvig mobilities by 2013.

Committee of the Regions views

1. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the European Commission proposal to coordinate EU education programmes in an integrated programme for lifelong learning. The Committee sees this as a very significant contribution towards efforts to encourage all stakeholders to work for rapid changes to general and further education and training systems. It meets the needs of the new knowledge economy and is in line with the Community's ambitions for individual participation and responsibility in society.

2. The Committee has on previous occasions highlighted the significance of a lifelong learning strategy and is anxious to help ensure that the integrated programme makes a powerful impact and provides a meaningful contribution in terms of democracy and prosperity.

2a. A Youth Debate was held in connection with the 10 year anniversary of the Committee of the Regions on November 17-18 2004. Youth representatives stressed that an urgent objective should be to give every pupil the chance to take part in exchange programmes, in order to gain an awareness of other cultures, languages and the European Community. The Committee of the Regions sees the proposed volume objectives as a step in the right direction and endorses the long-term objective highlighted by the youth representatives.

3. The Lisbon European Council noted that general education and vocational training are crucial to the EU's ability to rise to the challenge and ensure that the information society is available to all. This will enable the EU to achieve its full potential. Education initiatives must include encouragement for various forms of knowledge acquisition and development so that more and more people can be supported more successfully.

The local and regional level has a key role to play

4. Throughout the European Union the local and regional level has key responsibilities for the areas addressed in the Commission document.

5. In many European countries the regional and local level is responsible for general education, vocational training and adult education. It is here that education and training decisions are taken and put into practice. The local and regional level is also an element of the social partnership and a coordinator for local and regional development and growth. Consequently, it is also in its interest to develop workforce skills.

6. It also acts as a social service, with responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, be they children, adults or senior citizens. Another of its tasks is to help ensure that the most vulnerable groups can be part and parcel of society, especially people with physical and/or mental disabilities. It is also an employer and, as such, stands to gain directly from efforts to improve the skills of its workforce.

7. There is an important democratic element to local and regional efforts in the field of European education: the opportunity to take part and become a champion of democratic society.

8. It can also be said that local and regional authorities are uniquely placed to enter into constructive partnerships with the social partners and institutions for general and continuing education in order to tailor general education and vocational training courses to specific local needs and requirements.

9. Various regional and local cooperation projects act as a significant driving force for growth and development.

10. Education programmes enable the EU to reach out to citizens directly. No other EU endeavour affects so many people each year. The programmes also help to modernise education systems and help individuals update their skills. In view of the local and regional level's responsibilities, regional players should be an important target group for programme activities in the field of education and training.

11. The Regional networks for lifelong learning (R3L programme), set up by the Commission and the Committee of the Regions, is an excellent example of dissemination and development of lifelong learning in Europe. The Committee would welcome several other initiatives of this type that can rapidly take hold and actively contribute towards stimulating European integration at grassroots level.

12. The European local and regional level must be involved at an early stage of the education and training programme activities. It must never be reduced to merely accepting the results of a programme once it has expired.

The lifelong learning strategy's place in the integrated programme

13. Lifelong learning is learning-focused rather than education-focused, and is concerned with individual skills development rather than formal education systems.

14. The strategy extends from nursery school through to adult education, and addresses various forms of learning and education. It is important that this overarching approach is genuinely mainstreamed into the proposed integrated programme and sectoral programmes.

15. It should be the task of all the specific programmes — not just Comenius — to improve awareness of the diversity and value of European cultures.

16. The importance of sustainable economic, social and environmental development should be addressed, from a lifelong learning perspective, in the common objectives.

17. This is why the Commission Memorandum also makes clear that education and practical training systems should be integrated into a lifelong learning context. The Commission has already established that the new integrated programme must cover both academic education and vocational training. The Committee of the Regions endorses this approach. Programmes such as Socrates and Leonardo have been covered by different regulations and, consequently, different procedures, and this has been a drawback thus far.

18. The fact that basic vocational training comes under Leonardo and post-high school vocational training comes under Erasmus further highlights the need for good cross-sectoral project opportunities.

19. The Committee of the Regions would stress the need for optimum interaction between the different sectoral programmes. Both horizontal and vertical projects must thus be enabled and facilitated in a lifelong learning programme. The proposed structure would appear to be open to such closer cross-sectoral cooperation.

20. The Committee of the Regions considers, however, that in addition to this opening, there must also be a clear *move towards* enhancing cooperation between the different specific programmes, from the perspective of the European lifelong learning strategy.

Meeting current skills needs

21. Vocational training is changing rapidly. In vocational training with a lifelong learning slant, notions such as knowledge and learning take on important connotations, and the current working environment calls for better language skills, for example.

22. Social skills such as a willingness to take on responsibility, to work as part of a team, to get on well with colleagues and other adults, creativity, an ability to see the bigger picture and quality awareness are also becoming important factors in vocational training. Entrepreneurship, active citizenship, equal opportunities and combating racism and xenophobia are examples of other very important 'general' components of vocational training. Several of them are included under the specific objectives of the integrated programme, which the CoR considers positive.

23. In turn, the general education programmes must be more open to the world of work and future employment through, for example, partnerships with firms, project work, and by bringing representatives from the world of work into the classroom.

24. The Committee of the Regions believes that the programme will be able to provide a valuable boost to higher education. This is a very important premise for regional development.

25. Furthermore, development is often dependent on *small and medium-sized firms*, where employees tend not to have been through higher education. Education and training traditions vary, here. Consequently, it is also important to provide support for a development programme for workers with basic or high school level education needs. It is essential to roll out education and skills programmes in such a way that they reach those working in small and medium-sized firms.

26. It is also important to clarify how the programmes are to have the flexibility needed to cope with policy objectives and needs that might emerge during the programme period.

27. The Committee of the Regions would also stress the need for the distribution of resources to the various programmes to be a continuous process, linked to the budget and to the integrated programme's objectives. This also applies to development *between* the specific programmes and to redistribution options, in order to provide more encouragement for development and exchanges for students with a shorter academic career behind them.

Situation for participants

28. The European Parliament recently pointed out that because funding for exchange students is inadequate, it is mostly students from well-heeled backgrounds that have been able to benefit from exchange programmes. It is important that the Member States ensure that students genuinely have access to exchange programmes and funding, and that applicants' financial resources are taken into consideration.

29. A high priority development issue for the Committee of the Regions — and an area in which the integrated action programme for life-long learning can be of far-reaching importance — is social integration. This concerns broad, diverse groups of students with different support needs, from those with learning difficulties or experiencing social vulnerability and exclusion, to students arriving in a country and culture that is alien to them. Today, we can see that a large group of young people with inadequate basic education either interrupt their studies or abandon compulsory education altogether. It should be possible to support methodology development, skills transfers and other initiatives for young people's development.

30. This is such an important problem that it should be expressed clearly in the programme objectives and enabled through EU, national and regional and local programmes. 'Second Chance Schools' is an excellent example of European networks of this type, and contributes to methodology development, skills transfers and activities development.

31. Students with disabilities must be given genuine opportunities to participate in integrated programme activities.

32. With regard to adult participation in the exchange programmes, equal opportunities issues should also be highlighted so that both men and women can participate. Special attention should be paid to workers with new learning needs.

Inclusion of neighbouring third countries

33. The Committee of the Regions also welcomes the intention to include neighbouring third countries. In this context it would seem natural to refer to the European Parliament's statement on wider European neighbourhood. At the local and regional level, contacts were initiated at an early stage and it has been possible to break new ground by establishing contacts with countries that have recently joined the European Union. It would seem natural for this regional and local level work to continue and be extended to new countries.

Division of responsibility

34. The Committee of the Regions would stress the need for a clear division of responsibilities for programme efforts between the Community and the national level. The Member States should be responsible for the practical side as far as possible. A decentralised structure is crucial to the success of future efforts. The local and regional level will also have to play a more active role in this structure.

35. In accordance with the Commission proposal, the Community level should work with matters regarding objectives, general overview, general strategy, observation and analysis, and follow-up and assessment. The Community level will also have to deal with implementation matters, by identifying and disseminating successful forms of implementation. The Committee of the Regions considers that the local and regional level should play an important role in implementing, garnering support for and disseminating the new programmes.

36. Any decision-making procedures that mean that a matter would be handled by two levels should, as a rule, be avoided.

Views on the integrated programme components

37. The Committee of the Regions believes that the proposed integrated programme, with its current ambitions, is of great importance to the promotion of the mobility partnerships, projects and networks in Europe.

38. The mobility projects are extremely important for the local and regional level. It is often the small mobility projects decided at national level that make a significant impact and that advance the idea of Europe, active citizenship and democracy issues. It is important that the projects should provide scope for openness and opportunities for experience. This facilitates dissemination of knowledge and implementation. Mutual learning is a touchstone here.

39. Mobility projects must also increasingly aim to provide national, regional and local back-up systems to support continued mobility even after a project has ended, in order to maintain the structures and contacts that have been established. The projects should help to remove obstacles and encourage continuous exchanges so that the projects become part of regular activities. It is important that national education funding schemes should also enable students to study part of their course in another Member State.

40. With regard to the development programmes, it is essential to exploit the expertise they breed, e.g. through pools of experts, etc. Projects that value different forms of learning will be especially important to the lifelong learning strategy. The pioneering approach of the development projects should therefore, subject to certain conditions, make it possible to change course while the project is underway.

41. The Committee of the Regions believes that the proposed general/transversal programmes will be very important as a cohesive force and in terms of analysis and support for policy development. Other important tasks will involve launching new projects and networks and contributing to new processes that can meet the EU's education needs.- Given the importance of the regional and local level in the field of education, a link-up is needed between this activity and the Committee of the Regions.

42. The Jean Monnet programme will play a strategic role for European integration in higher education and research.

The committee

43. The Committee of the Regions would stress that that committee that is to assist the Commission (Article 10 of the proposal) should:

— work with objectives and policy development;

— continuously follow and encourage the integrated programme's common objectives;

— ensure that the European strategy for life-long learning actually filters through to the various sectoral programmes.

This committee should have overall responsibility for ensuring that barriers are not created between the sectoral programmes. Cooperation will also be needed between that committee and the Committee of the Regions on future efforts.

Volume objectives

44. The Committee of the Regions endorses the proposed volume objectives, according to which the mobility programmes are expected to treble. These ambitious targets are likely to strengthen the European Community and enhance cohesion. However, the volume objectives must not allow the qualitative side of the programmes to suffer.

Simplification of administrative procedures

45. The Committee of the Regions also welcomes a simplified/flat-rate costing system. The CoR has on previous occasions drawn attention to the negative impact of red tape on application numbers. Many players decline to take part because of complicated document requirements. The Committee of the Regions considers that administration and accounting requirements should must be commensurate with the size of funding involved. Smaller projects need not be subject to the same comprehensive, laborious checks as major projects.

46. The Committee would, however, point out that circumstances and ability to take part in the programmes vary, and this can impact on costs. This can be a question of, for example, lack of familiarity with studying, disabilities, ability to afford travel and accommodation expenses or different regional circumstances.

Titles

47. The Committee of the Regions would also point out that the new programme and its various components should be given unambiguous practical titles so that they are clear and understandable regardless of the European language being used. Expressions such as 'the integrated programme' and 'the general/transversal programme' will lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

48. It should be made sufficiently plain that the 'integrated programme' refers to the whole initiative, while the Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig and Jean Monnet programmes are parts of the whole. It should also be made clear that the general/transversal programme has a strategic, umbrella function. The Committee of the Regions feels that this matter should be addressed with particular care.

Subsidiarity and proportionality

49. The programme complements national or regional and local initiatives. The proposed legal basis provides opportunities to add to these. The programme is chiefly active in areas where Member State action cannot be efficient. The aim is not to change the structure and content of educational systems; it focuses rather on areas where value added can be created at European level. With regard to proportionality, the proposal has been designed to achieve maximum simplification.

Committee of the Regions proposals

1. The local and the regional level must be involved in the early stages of the integrated programme.

2. Local and regional players should be an important target group for initiatives concerning European development and integration in general, and programme activities in the field of education in particular.

3. Non-formal and informal learning should be emphasised more in the document.

4. One way of avoiding demarcation problems and obstacles would be try to include as many as possible of the rules for accessing the various parts of the integrated programme in one common Article (equivalent to Article 4 of the proposal) and correspondingly restrict the specific access rules for each of the Comenius, Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and Grundtvig sectoral programmes.

5. It is important that a corresponding openness should also filter through to the way the proposed financial frameworks are established for the specific projects.

6. The link between basic and higher education, between general education and vocational training and between formal, non-formal and informal learning needs to be actively strengthened during the programme period.

7. The European life-long learning strategy should be more clearly expressed in the integrated programme and its various components.

8. The Committee of the Regions considers that the local and the regional level must play an important role in implementing, garnering support for and disseminating the integrated programme and its various components.

9. The Committee of the Regions wishes to play an active role in publicising, disseminating and discussing the progress made on these issues at Community level.

10. The proposed general/transversal programme will have a strategic role as a cohesive force in terms of policy development, new projects, and networks for analysing and helping create new mechanisms to meet the Community's education needs. Given the importance of the regional and local level in the field of education, a link-up is needed between this activity and the Committee of the Regions.

Brussels, 23 February 2005.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Peter STRAUB