

**EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE**  
**OF THE EFTA STATES**

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**WORKING GROUP ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH**

**Comments by the EEA EFTA States on the Commission's proposal for a Community multi-annual programme (2004-2006) for the effective integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education and training systems in Europe (eLearning Programme)**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The EEA EFTA States welcome the proposal on eLearning and in general agree to the choice of objectives and the lines of action proposed. However, while it addresses the major problems facing education and training and puts forward solutions, the proposal does not adequately take into account the need for involving more actors in the development of "virtual campuses", given that this area is of particular interest for small countries. We welcome the efforts proposed to involve a large number of secondary schools in twinning projects. Furthermore, we welcome the initiatives regarding the need to define digital literacy in relation to lifelong learning, the fight against the digital divide and the dissemination of good practices.

**I INTRODUCTION**

1. The Commission adopted on 24 May 2000 a Communication on eLearning - Designing Tomorrows Education, COM (2000) 318. The EEA EFTA States submitted Comments (4/TD/W/011) on this document on 18 October 2000. The Communication was designed to transpose the eEurope action plan into national education and training programmes by mobilising the educational and cultural communities and the economic and social players in Europe in the use of new information and communication technologies.

2. On 19 December 2002, the Commission presented a proposal for an *eLearning* Programme 2004 – 2006, COM (2002) 751 final. “*eLearning*” has over the last few years become shorthand for a vision in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) mediated learning is an integral component of education and training systems. In this scenario, the ability to use ICT becomes a new form of literacy – “digital literacy”. Digital literacy thus becomes as important as “classic” literacy and numeracy were one hundred years ago. Without digital literacy, citizens can neither participate fully in society nor acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

3. This document presents the Comments of the EEA EFTA States on the Commission’s proposal.

## II GENERAL REMARKS

4. The EEA EFTA States welcome the proposal for an *eLearning* programme. We realise that ICT definitely has become a major force of change in teaching and learning. The Lisbon European Council with its initiative regarding the development of future objectives is an important driving force in this area, as well as the Brugge / Copenhagen Processes. In higher education, the Bologna Declaration is important to follow up, even if it is not initiated by the EU. *eLearning* has a major role in other programmes such as the *eEurope* programme and the 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. It is also a main theme in the education programmes Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci.

5. However, desired changes do not occur by themselves. They are the result of the inter-relations between technology, human action and organisations. To ensure that ICT becomes a natural part of the teaching-learning processes, measures must be developed in a number of areas. The challenge is to identify these areas, the inter-relation between them and the measures within them.

6. In general, the EEA EFTA States agree to the choice of objectives and the lines of action proposed for the *eLearning* programme. However, while addressing the major challenges facing education and training, the proposal does not adequately take into account the different needs of European countries. Small countries have different needs from those of large countries. Likewise conditions related to languages and geography make a difference.

7. The EEA EFTA States also agree to the importance of inter-relating *eLearning* and lifelong learning. *eLearning* is of major importance in developing digital literacy and fighting the digital divide.

### III DETAILED COMMENTS

#### (i) *Promoting digital literacy*

8. The first line of action focuses on “eLearning for promoting digital literacy”. Understanding digital literacy is a challenge, the concept being difficult to define or measure. It is a question of what is needed to provide each citizen with the skills necessary to live and work in the information society, and enable the population at large to become digitally literate. This is of major concern in the concept of lifelong learning. In our opinion, it is of great importance to put more effort into the work of defining the content of digital literacy, and to disseminate current knowledge in this area. The EEA EFTA States have a good experience in this area, and may be able to contribute to the programme. We agree that targeted seminars, workshops and reports are important ways of communicating knowledge on these issues.

9. It is important to develop good indicators / benchmarks for measuring the impact of ICT in education: counting numbers of computers per student/pupil is not enough. Organisation of access to and use of computers in societies where they are scarce, particularly in homes, will be another challenge. Advancement in wireless technologies and the development of handheld devices, one of the strengths of European industry, could also provide a variety of opportunities in the area of education.

#### (ii) *European virtual campuses*

10. For the EEA EFTA States, it is of particular interest to participate in strategic projects with trans-national virtual campuses. We suggest that the financial part of the programme concerning this be strengthened. It is important to give students in small institutions the opportunity to participate in activities offered by larger institutions in other countries, without having to move. On the other hand, small institutions may be offering very specialised courses.

#### (iii) *etwinning of schools in Europe / School twinning via the Internet*

11. Confident teachers with up-to-date skills in the pedagogical use of ICT are a prerequisite for teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and for eLearning in particular. Most countries share this challenge, and there are a number of ongoing initiatives across Europe in this area, such as the European Schoolnet (EUN) and various projects within the Comenius chapter of the Socrates programme. The EEA EFTA States welcome the focus on teachers in the proposal regarding etwinning. In our opinion, we are still far from having sufficient teachers with adequate competence in the pedagogical use of ICT in education. At the same time, we stress the importance of not duplicating efforts but building on what is already being done, e.g., within the framework of the above mentioned actions.

12. The EEA EFTA States support the measures proposed in order to make it possible for all schools in Europe to build pedagogical partnerships with schools elsewhere in Europe. This is especially important for the reinforcement of language learning. Building networks between schools, to exchange ideas and good practices, are of the greatest importance. To use and further develop existing networks like the EUN is essential.

(iv) *Transversal actions and monitoring of eLearning*

13. In recent years, we have witnessed a vast growth in the number of centres for acquiring knowledge. Today, there is a multitude of private suppliers in the field of eLearning, which together with public service providers give the individual or corporate user greater freedom of choice than before. This creates a new challenge: the need to identify resources, from which users searching for eLearning ventures or offers can benefit. The EEA EFTA States support actions aiming at developing and maintaining an eLearning portal, providing easy, one-stop access to European eLearning activities.

14. We believe it is important that the EU consolidate its efforts in promoting eLearning, and that it is positive that the proposal have an emphasis on co-operation with and support of the EUN network. It will be interesting to study the framework in this field planned by the Commission and the proposed development of a monitoring mechanism. In this area, studies and efforts done by other international organisations, including the OECD, IEA and UNESCO, should be taken into account.

#### **CLOSING REMARKS**

15. The proposal for an eLearning programme is an important initiative in the field of learning in all levels of education and training in Europe. The EEA EFTA States are looking forward to joining the programme, both in order to gain experience and to contribute with their own experience, expertise and results. However, in our opinion the programme could benefit from better financing, especially in order to make it possible for a higher number of institutions to test the concept of “virtual campuses”.

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