

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA
STANDING COMMITTEE
OF THE EFTA STATES

4/TD/W/001
20 June 1996
Brussels

WORKING GROUP ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH

**Comments by the EFTA Working Group¹ on
"Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society"
White Paper on Education and Training**

I INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL REMARKS

1. The White Paper on education and training, "Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society" (COM(95)590) , is part of a process designed to provide an analysis and to put forward proposals for action within the European Union in the fields of education and training.
2. Since 1 January 1995, the EFTA EEA countries have participated fully in all programmes of the Community in the field of education and training on the basis of the EEA Agreement. Against this background, and in the spirit of the information and consultation process provided for in the EEA Agreement, the EFTA Working Group on Education is pleased to forward these first comments on the White Paper. The EFTA Working Group on Education will closely follow the further debate and the development of the ideas and proposals for action put forward in the White Paper, and looks forward to a continuing dialogue on these matters.
3. The EFTA Working Group on Education welcomes the White Paper, considering it a good basis for further discussion on the role of education in meeting the challenges of our time as well as for developing new actions both on a national and a European level. The Group appreciates the analytical approach in the first section of the White Paper, and has noted with interest the proposed action guidelines of section II.
4. The **principle of subsidiarity**, as established in the Treaty on the European Union, should continue to guide the Community policy in the field of education and training, and the EFTA Working Group is pleased to see this confirmed in the White Paper. It is true that the internal market, with its freedom of movement of people, as well as the development towards an information society without frontiers, makes it

¹ Comprising the Delegations of the three EFTA EEA States Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway

relevant to take the European dimension into account when formulating an education policy. However, the cultural diversity and different traditions, as expressed through the various education policies of the European countries, should be safeguarded. At the European level, the focus should be on promoting quality and developing tools that facilitate student mobility, mutual recognition of qualifications and increased co-operation between educational institutions at all levels. Such actions will be an important contribution to achieving the objectives set out in the White Paper.

II THE CHALLENGES

5. The White Paper outlines three factors of social and economic upheaval in today's society: the impact of the information society, the impact of internationalization and the impact of the scientific and technological change. The EFTA Working Group agrees that these are major challenges of our time, and that education and training are of crucial importance in making it possible for everybody to play an active role in society, avoiding the social exclusion that follows both from unemployment and from lack of understanding of the scientific and technological development.

6. The EFTA Working Group on Education shares the view that **employment** is a prime area of concern for the European nations and that education and training are of central importance for combating social exclusion. However, the purpose and aim of education and training should not be linked exclusively to the question of employment and economic growth. The Working Group fully adheres to the view of the Round Table of European Industrialists as quoted in the White Paper: "The essential mission of education is to help everyone to develop his/her own potential and become a complete human being as opposed to a tool at the service of the economy, and that the acquisition of knowledge and skills should go hand in hand with building up character, broadening outlook and accepting one's responsibility in society."

7. As pointed out in the White Paper, **the information technologies** have an important impact on work and organisation of production, and hence on employment. However, the EFTA Working Group would also like to focus on how new information technologies influence society in general, especially with regard to culture, communication and social life. Through new means of communication, like the Internet, virtual reality and inter-active television to name just a few, society is faced with a truly global network for cultural exchange and new ways of perceiving and communicating with the world. The new technologies offer new possibilities and a bigger freedom of choice for the individual, but they may also lead to alienation and loss of human contact. Therefore, it will be even more important than before that people are able to discern between the positive and negative sides of information, and that they are prepared to make rational choices. This aspect of the information society, and the role of education with regard to it, should be taken duly into account.

8. **The ethical dimension** of the scientific and technological development should have an important place when formulating a policy dealing with the impact of this development. The "ethics of science" has two important aspects. Firstly, the training of researchers and scientists should give them a sound understanding of the ethical

implications of their work. Secondly, everybody should receive reliable and objective information on the consequences of scientific development. Therefore, it is important that the education system gives pupils and students a sound understanding of the implications of, e.g. biotechnology, "intelligent" machines or new electronic media.

III ACTION GUIDELINE PROPOSALS

9. The Working Group has noted with interest the five general objectives identified in the White Paper in order to implement practical actions. However, it may be worth pointing out that some of the objectives are truly general, like encouraging the acquisition of knowledge and combating social exclusion, while others, e.g. developing proficiency in three Community languages, must be seen as rather specific.

10. The development of methods of recognizing skills acquired by individuals throughout their lives is a fundamental challenge. A "**personal skills card**" may be useful in that respect, if its value is formally related to existing certificates and qualification requirements. Skills cards and similar documents of accreditation should accordingly be issued at a national level, within the training and certification structures of the individual country. At the European level, the directives for mutual recognition of diplomas should be maintained and further developed.

11. Regarding the proposal for "**second chance schools**", we fear that the creation of such a system might lead to a separation between the pupils who are successful and those who are excluded, the consequences of the initiative thus being contrary to the intention. The way of organizing the education system in order to give disadvantaged pupils better possibilities should remain a national responsibility. Secondly, while acknowledging the importance of providing special schemes for disadvantaged pupils and students, the Working Group finds that the idea of second chance schools, as set out in the White Paper, would not be suitable for many countries. In the case of some of the EFTA States, setting up new special schools and paying higher salaries than in the "normal" schools, would be contrary to the current national education policy. The tradition in these countries is to provide access to a wide range of educational choices for disadvantaged pupils through integration in the normal education system and, where necessary, provide special pedagogic support to the less advantaged and to those who wish to have a "second chance". The focus should be on developing approaches that minimize the risk of educational failure in the "normal" school system.

12. As far as the proposal for a **European voluntary service** is concerned, the EFTA Working Group has noted this with interest. Such an action might give a substantial contribution both to combating social exclusion and to enhancing young people's social awareness. However, the work carried out under the scheme must be supplementary to, and not substitute the work carried out by employed persons.

13. **Proficiency in languages** is increasingly important for people's professional and social opportunities. The EFTA States support the basic conclusion in the resolution of the Council of Education Ministers of 31 March 1995 on language proficiency.

However, the objective should not only be limited to the Community languages. The basic prerequisite should be that everybody has the opportunity to learn two foreign languages.

14. The EFTA Working Group cannot support the idea of a "**European quality label**" to be awarded to schools according to their promotion of language learning. In the EFTA countries, a general aim is ensure that all schools offer an equally good education to everybody. To distinguish some schools with a quality label would not be in line with this policy.

15 The question of **treating investment in training of employees and capital investment** merits further consideration. However, as this has important fiscal and legal implications at a national level, the EFTA Working Group feels that a further clarification is needed before agreeing to a common European approach.

* * * * *