

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA
STANDING COMMITTEE
OF THE EFTA STATES

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Brussels

WORKING GROUP ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH

**Towards a Europe of Knowledge
Communication from the Commission**

Comments by the EEA EFTA States

1. The Commission Communication "Towards a Europe of knowledge" sets out the guidelines for future Community action in the areas of education, training and youth for the period 2000-2006, paving the way for legal instruments to be proposed in the spring of 1998.
2. The EEA EFTA States, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, participate in all the current Community programmes in these areas, and also in other activities undertaken outside the programmes. The following are the comments from the EEA EFTA States to the Communication, as elaborated by the EFTA Working Group on Education, Training and Youth.

I INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL REMARKS

3. Education is a key factor in the development of modern society. The international "knowledge society" makes new demands on our countries' education systems, on working life and on each individual. Thus, the education systems should enable each person to make full use of available information, and it should create the conditions necessary for the development of a culture of learning and a diversity of learning environment, so that each person's abilities can be fully exploited to the benefit of the individual and the good of society. The proposed Community activities may give a valuable contribution to fulfilling these goals, while respecting fully the principle of subsidiarity.
4. The EEA EFTA States welcome the Communication from the Commission as a positive sign to put more emphasis on education, training and youth activities in the building of Europe. The future programmes will play a key role in the shaping of this policy. Furthermore, the Communication shows that the Commission will take into account the experiences from the present programmes and thereby secure continuity. The EEA EFTA States therefore support the Commission's approach, to increase

integration, to limit the number of aims, to achieve more focused actions and more streamlined administration.

5. We acknowledge the vital importance of education and training for employability and economic growth. However, one should not lose sight of other aspects of education policy, especially general education for the benefit of the individual outside the workplace. It should also be borne in mind that solid basic education is the prerequisite for flexibility during working life and makes it easier for the individual to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing labour market.

6. This being said, we agree to the focus on lifelong learning, including both broader access to learning, and continuous updating of knowledge. The lifelong learning perspective should cover both formal and informal learning throughout life, and this strategy should be pursued, building upon the positive results already achieved.

7. The Communication mentions actions to assist the underprivileged, especially those who have left school without qualifications. We attach great importance to such actions. However, there is no mention of the disabled. The EEA EFTA States would suggest that some measures aiming at the integration of disabled in the education system are included in the future programmes. In general, emphasis should be put on activities directed towards the weaker groups, and the importance of integration of the socially excluded through education and training.

8. Without going into any details, the Commission indicates that it will propose a common framework for all activities in the education, training and youth areas. We will underline the need to make actions in the youth field more visible. While recognising that there could be stronger links between these areas than has been the case for the existing programmes, one should also acknowledge the specific character of the youth area, which distinguishes it from the education and training programmes.

II BUILDING A EUROPE OF KNOWLEDGE

9. The EEA EFTA States agree that our societies must offer all citizens greater opportunity for access to knowledge, and that the notion of an educational area needs to be understood in the broadest possible sense. It should also be an overriding goal of the new programmes that “the Europe of knowledge” encompasses everybody.

10. The focus on a broader-based understanding of citizenship is supported, as it may contribute to promoting democracy, common values and cultural diversity. Education for citizenship should play a part in the development of personal integrity and stimulate involvement in the global society. Pupils, students and apprentices should gain experience of democratic working conditions through shared decision making at the place of learning. Also in this context, it important to focus on and develop activities supporting exchanges of youth groups and youth organisations.

III A LIMITED NUMBER OF OBJECTIVES

11. In general, we agree to what is listed under this heading. However, in discussing the need to test new approaches and instruments, the second-chance schools are mentioned as an example. We would like to point out that the idea of second-chance schools as separate institutions does not fit in with the education policies of the EEA EFTA States. In general the educational systems of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway try to offer everybody education and training within the existing school system, including further chances. We therefore think that the different ways the education systems are organised in order to give disadvantaged pupils better possibilities should be focused in the programmes.

IV MORE FOCUSED ACTIVITIES

12. The EEA EFTA States agree to the need of focusing the measures undertaken within the programmes, and in general we find that the priorities as expressed in the six types of actions listed are of major importance. More specifically, we would like to stress the importance of physical mobility as a key element also of the future programmes. The arrangements for exchanges should continue, promoting mobility for all groups. We would especially like to underline the usefulness of teacher mobility in this respect. One might also consider using the programmes as a mean for making it easier to take all or part of one's education in a country other than one's own as an ordinary pupil, student or apprentice. The mobility programmes may also contribute to the internationalisation of participating companies, institutions and non-governmental organisations.

13. With regard to virtual mobility, this is a valuable tool to gain access to new types of education material, and to reinforce the cultural identity of Europeans. In this respect, it is important to give young people the basic skills required to be able to use the new technologies to their benefit.

14. The EEA EFTA States would also like to stress the importance of language skills. Languages are the door openers to the various cultures of Europe, and are also essential for enabling students, pupils and teachers to participate in exchanges and multi-national projects. Community activities like the present Lingua part of Socrates should therefore be continued.

V THE PARTIES INVOLVED

15. The EEA EFTA States agree that the development of the new generation of activities should be based on shared responsibilities between all parties involved. It is especially important to include the social partners, the educational partners and non-governmental organisations both at a national and a European level, and to exploit and strengthen the international networks in which they participate.

16. With regard to international co-operation, the EEA EFTA States favour a wide co-operation also with countries outside Europe. We welcome the extended co-operation with the applicant countries participating in the pre-accession strategy. It is important to ensure full participation of all participating countries.

VI STRUCTURE, BUDGETARY RESOURCES AND IMPLEMENTATION

17. In principle, the EEA EFTA States are positive to the idea of an integration of the present activities into a larger framework. However, special attention should be given to the youth area. We would recommend a separate budget decision and a separate committee for the youth activities. However, the possibility of merging the present Youth for Europe programme with the activities in the field of Voluntary Service might be considered.

18. With regard to budgetary resources, there should be a realistic relation between the aims of the activities and the allocated budget.

19. The concept of establishing a management structure with shared responsibility between the Community, the participating countries and other parties involved is a positive one. Visibility and transparency of the co-operation is of great importance, and the idea of partnerships would ensure a better continuing political overview, as well as wider-ranging consultation and appropriate implementation.

20. The proposals for improved and simplified procedures are generally positive. We welcome a greater degree of decentralisation, while realising the important role of the Commission in terms of management and supervision of budget execution as well as stimulation and co-ordination of decentralised management structures.

21. The proposed strengthening of the assistance given by national agencies to partners and applicants is important. In this respect, we support a more flexible approach. The capacity of the national agencies should not be restricted unnecessarily by demands of formal procedures. Simplification of application procedures and flexibility in the funding procedures would also be of great importance in stimulating potential participants to actually present applications and project proposals.

22. The experiences the EEA EFTA States have had with participating in the present programmes have been generally very positive. We are fully prepared to participate actively in the shaping of the future activities in the areas of education, training and youth, and look forward to a fruitful dialogue with all parties involved.