

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 a Communication from the Commission
on e-Learning - Designing Tomorrows Education**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EEA EFTA States welcome the Communication on e-Learning and in general agree to the choice of objectives and the lines of action proposed in the Communication. However, while addressing important problems and solutions facing education and training, it does not adequately take into account the different standards in European countries, latest technological development and best practice. Also, more emphasis should be put on how the technological solutions and goals discussed in the Communication can be used beneficially in teaching and learning.

I INTRODUCTION

1. The Commission on 24 May 2000 adopted a Communication on e-Learning - Designing Tomorrows Education, COM (2000) 318. The Communication is designed to implement into education and training the eEurope action plan, mobilising the educational and cultural communities and the economic and social players in Europe in the use of new information and communication technologies.

II GENERAL REMARKS

2. The EEA EFTA States welcome the Communication on e-Learning. The rapid growth of the Internet and the development of the global information economy give the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education a new meaning. From being a fringe activity for persons with special interests, one now sees that ICT definitely has become a major force of change in teaching and learning.

3. However, desired change does not occur by itself. It is the result of the inter-relations between technology, human action and organisations. To ensure that ICT becomes a natural part of the teaching-learning process, measures must be developed in a number of areas. The challenge is to identify these areas and the measures within them.

4. The e-Learning initiative is an attempt to come to terms with such challenges at the European level. The Communication outlines several goals regarding the use of the ICT within the knowledge based society and general ideas as to how the Commission plans to assist the Member States in reaching these goals are also expressed.

5. In general, the EEA EFTA States agree to the choice of objectives and the lines of action proposed in the Communication. However, while addressing important problems and solutions facing education and training, it does not adequately take into account the different standards in European countries, latest technological development and best practice. Also, more emphasis should be put on how the technological solutions and goals discussed in the Communication can be used beneficially in teaching and learning.

6. The EEA EFTA States also agree to the importance of integrating the gender perspective in policies related to the knowledge-based economy. Women are underrepresented in information technology professions, and particular emphasis should be put on enhancing participation of women in relevant education and training.

III DETAILED COMMENTS

(i) Equipment

7. The first line of action focuses on multimedia computers in schools. One of the vital changes taking place right now is the development of high capacity Internet connection. In order to reach the objectives stated in the e-Learning initiative, the European countries must secure that the schools in each country have high speed Internet connections in order to utilise multimedia based learning resources and to give pupils and teachers the opportunity to communicate and co-operate across boundaries. Hence, this line of action should be labelled 'infrastructure' instead of 'equipment'.

8. The aim to connect all schools in the Union to the Internet by the end of 2001 seems realistic, but on the other hand there is the less defined goal 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. The concept of digital literacy used in the Communication is difficult to define or measure. No attempt to do so can be found.

9. Many European countries have already passed the number of computers per pupil stated in the communication. Some countries have also started to look towards other solutions than "multimedia computers". This includes thin clients (smaller

computers), electronic books and various portable devices. New types of peripherals and a greater use of the Internet in the distribution of educational material could greatly decrease the initial and running costs of ICT devices, production and distribution of software and content particularly in the less advanced countries. Advances 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 but these are not mentioned in the Communication.

10. The goal of having 5-15 users per multimedia computer by 2004 is in our opinion not feasible, and we think that other solutions providing access to educational content, for example portable equipment, could be more promising. By taking into account the present state of the art solutions not only in education, but also in areas such as e-business, a more rapid advance can be seen in the area of e-Learning.

(ii) Training at all levels

11. Confident teachers with up-to-date skills in the pedagogical use of ICT are a prerequisite for learning in the 21st century and for e-learning in general. Most countries share this challenge, and there are a number of on-going initiatives across Europe in this area. In our opinion the Communication should put greater emphasis on training for teachers, because teachers should be the prime agents of change in education.

(iii) The development of good quality multimedia services and content

12. High quality multimedia services and content is necessary in order to utilise the investments being made in infrastructure and training. Multimedia resources are important both in order to ensure learning resources, which are tailored to the cultural context of the pupils and students, as well as to promote the European and global dimension in the subject matter. It is also important to continue and to reinforce the fight against illegal and harmful content on the Internet, i.e. through the Internet Action Plan of the EU.

(iv) The development and networking of centres for acquiring knowledge

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 e-learning, 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 e-learning ventures or offers can benefit. One solution to this challenge can be the development of e-learning portals, which can offer structured and relevant information to prospective consumers of e-learning.

14. We think it is important that the EU consolidates its efforts in promoting e-learning, and it is positive that in the Communication there is an emphasis on co-operation within the various programmes and with the EUN-network. It will be interesting to study the framework in this field planned by the Commission and the proposed development of an observation mechanism. Here, one should also take into

account studies and efforts being done by other international organisations, including the OECD.

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