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Subject :        An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and  
                      training  
                      - Exchange of views

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With a view to the exchange of views to be held in Council on 16 February 2009, delegations will find in the Annex a Presidency discussion paper on the above subject, as endorsed by the Permanent Representatives Committee on 30 January 2009.

While it is intended to serve as a platform to enable Ministers to express their views on the various elements of the proposed framework outlined in the paper, the Presidency felt it appropriate - particularly with regard to the issue of benchmarks - to provide some guidance for the discussion by means of specific questions (see box on page 7).

## **An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training**

**- Presidency discussion paper -**

### **1. Introduction**

While the responsibility for education and training remains firmly with national governments, it was the universal recognition that Member States face a number of common challenges, that some goals cannot be achieved by individual countries acting alone and that others are easier to achieve if countries learn from one another and develop common tools which led to the adoption in 2001-2002 of the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme. This established for the first time a solid framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training, based on common objectives and with the primary aim of supporting the improvement of national education and training systems through complementary EU-level tools, mutual learning and exchanges of good practice. At the same time, developing higher skills through better education and training systems was recognised as an essential part of Europe's overall strategy to deliver the high levels of sustainable, knowledge-based growth and jobs aimed at under the Lisbon process, whilst also promoting social inclusion and responsible citizenship.

As the lifetime of the '2010' work programme draws to a close and preparations begin for assessing the overall impact of the broader Lisbon Strategy, the time seems ripe to take stock of the programme's achievements so far and to start defining the priorities, objectives and tools for European cooperation in education and training over the coming decade. In anticipation of further developments with the Lisbon process, it is vital that education and training continue to receive the due attention they deserve beyond 2010 and remain firmly anchored in the broader Strategy. As will be made clear in the set of Council conclusions planned for adoption by the EYC Council in May 2009, the updated framework for European cooperation in education and training should be established in a form which is flexible enough to respond not only to current challenges and objectives, but also those arising from the broader new Strategy after 2010.

A proactive approach of this kind seems particularly relevant in the light of the current economic downturn. As the EU seeks collectively to minimise the repercussions of the global financial crisis and set a course for renewed growth, it is essential that the momentum in favour of efficient and equitable investment in human capital through education and training be maintained. Good policies in these areas will simultaneously aid recovery from recent shocks and build the basis for meeting future challenges with confidence.

## **2. Evaluation of the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme**

Since the current work programme's inception in 2002, progress has been monitored by means of periodical evaluations in the form of :

- a. joint Council/Commission reports (in 2004, 2006 and 2008);
- b. annual detailed reports by the Commission analysing progress against an agreed set of statistical indicators and five key benchmarks.

Complementary feedback on the '2010' work programme, together with input for the new strategic framework designed to replace it, is described in the Commission's Impact Assessment<sup>1</sup>, and was provided in 2008 by means of:

- a. a large-scale written consultation of Member States;
- b. consultations among researchers in education and training (EENE/NESSE)
- c. a Stakeholders' Forum;
- d. discussions within the ETCG;
- e. three meetings of the High Level Group.

In terms of the overall impact of the work programme so far, while the EU's education and training performance is broadly comparable with the best in the world, there are still significant backlogs for the EU: reading literacy and early school leaving are among the many substantial challenges still facing Europe, while insufficient progress in the field of higher education continues to undermine Europe's ambition to be the world's leading knowledge economy and society.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially sections 1.2 and 1.3 of doc. 17535/08 ADD 1.

It is against the above background and in light of the increasingly apparent need to adjust and update the current framework to take account of evolving new challenges that the Commission submitted its proposal for an updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the next decade<sup>2</sup>.

### **3. Main objectives and challenges for the future of European cooperation in education and training**

Under the Commission proposal, and following several discussions among Member States, it is suggested that future European cooperation in education and training should address the following four strategic challenges<sup>3</sup>, which should be broad enough to cover the most important and relevant issues at all levels of education and training up until 2020:

#### ***1. Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality***

*Lifelong learning and learner mobility represent the two key areas of the European cooperation in education and training, which have demonstrated definite added value at national level over the last decade. Lifelong learning comprises learning at all ages and in all contexts. Member States agreed to put in place by 2006 coherent and comprehensive national lifelong learning strategies, an essential element of which is learner mobility between countries.*

#### ***2. Improving the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes***

*High quality education and training systems which are both efficient and equitable are crucial for Europe's success. The major challenge is to ensure the acquisition of key competences by everyone, while developing the excellence that will allow Europe to retain a strong global role in higher education. Learning outcomes at all levels must be relevant for professional and private life.*

#### ***3. Promoting equity and active citizenship***

*Education and training policy should enable all citizens, irrespective of age, gender and socio-economic background, to acquire, update and develop over a lifetime both job-specific skills and the key competences needed to foster further learning, active citizenship and intercultural dialogue.*

#### ***4. Enhancing innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training***

*Innovation and creativity are key factors in enterprise development and crucial to Europe's ability to face the challenges of international competition and sustainable development.*

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<sup>2</sup> Doc. 17535/08 + ADD 1 + ADD 2.

<sup>3</sup> Detailed on pages 6-11 of doc. 17535/08.

There is widespread recognition that these strategic challenges need to be addressed in a joined-up policy covering all levels of education and training and that, as with the current work programme, they need to be accompanied by a set of indicators and benchmarks to provide an essential means of monitoring and communicating progress, as well as identifying future challenges, at European level.

On the specific issue of benchmarks, agreement has yet to be reached between the Member States as to the number of benchmarks and their precise scope and content. However, delegations put forward the following points in the discussions held during the High Level Group meetings under the French and Czech Presidencies.

Firstly, on a general level, a number of basic principles should be applied when setting any European benchmarks under the new framework, namely that these should:

- i) maintain continuity with the existing benchmarks under the current work programme;
- ii) be measurable, realistic and relevant for all Member States;
- iii) be directly linked to the objectives of the new framework and demonstrate clear added-value;
- iv) avoid creating extra administrative or financial burdens by making maximum use of existing data;
- v) not undermine the principle of subsidiarity.

The Commission proposes that the Council should consider a series of areas, at various stages of development, in which benchmarks and indicators could add value to the efforts of Member States. These can be distinguished as follows:

- First, 4 are largely based on existing ones (*Adult participation, Low achievers, Early school leavers* and, to a certain extent, *Tertiary-level attainment*). The Commission proposes that these should broadly be maintained as a means of building on the progress made under the current '2010' work programme, although some discussion may be needed as to the precise level to be set for each.

- Second, 3 of the new ones (*Mobility, Employability and Innovation & Creativity*) would, if considered acceptable, require some form of official Council mandate requesting their development. More particularly:
- (a) a *Mobility* benchmark would have clear European added value and provide some response to the November 2008 conclusions on youth mobility. However, agreement would be needed on its precise parameters, e.g. the overall target, the levels of education covered, types of mobility concerned and means of measurement;
  - (b) an *Employability* benchmark, which should be linked to the objective of supporting the employability of all citizens as well as to the main aims of the Lisbon agenda, would require further clarification provided by the Commission before a mandate to proceed with development could be given;
  - (c) similarly, a *Creativity and Innovation* benchmark to measure the extent to which education systems promote these would require further explanation before any go-ahead for its development could be given.
- Third, the 3 remaining new ones (*Languages, Pre-primary education and Investment in higher education*) also raise a number of specific questions:
- (a) regarding a *Languages* benchmark: while the issue of languages has gained added impetus since the objective set at the 2002 Barcelona European summit and been supported subsequently by other initiatives, the question arises as to which would be more appropriate: an input-oriented benchmark based on the teaching of at least 2 foreign languages or an output-oriented one based on actual competence in foreign languages?
  - (b) regarding a *Pre-primary education* benchmark: the Commission proposes that the benchmark on the access of pre-school children to childcare should be developed to cover pre-primary education, the importance of which in terms of enhancing equity in education is beyond dispute. However, it will be important to ensure that any benchmark actually benefits the target group of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- (c) regarding an *Investment in higher education* benchmark, the importance of investment in higher education is clear to all. However, a fair number of delegations point out that the Commission's proposal is input-oriented and to some extent overlaps with the target of 3% for R&D.

### **QUESTIONS FOR MINISTERS**

**In the light of the current economic crisis, and in view of the four strategic challenges and the link between these and the proposed benchmarks:**

- 1. Given the considerable investment already made, and the efforts still required in at least four of the areas, can the Council agree that the areas covered by the existing benchmarks be maintained and/or updated to support the identification of good practices and the measurement of progress?**
- 2. Which are the most urgent new priorities with potential added value for European co-operation in education and training, including through the development of benchmarks and/or indicators?**

*(It is suggested that Ministers focus primarily on the political rather than the quantitative aspects of the proposed new benchmarks, i.e. the target areas chosen for each of them. Further, more detailed discussion based on the outcomes of the exchange of views can be held at the level of the Education Committee.)*

#### 4. Main principles of the future working methods of OMC

Used as a tool to implement the '2010' work programme whilst taking account of the diversity of Member States' systems, the open method of coordination (OMC) has provided a very useful means of supporting progress towards a set of shared objectives measured against a number of common indicators and benchmarks. Much has been achieved, but in the light of the evaluation referred to in section 2, there is still a need to ensure that policy cooperation is relevant and concrete, that it produces visible results and that these reach stakeholders and policy makers, including at the highest political level.

With this in view, the four strategic objectives outlined at the beginning of section 3 could best be implemented by the Council setting a limited number of medium-term, targeted and relevant priorities over an agreed period<sup>4</sup>. Such an approach would provide the framework with the kind of flexibility required by Member States as a basis for efficient future cooperation in the field of education and training.

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to as "*immediate priorities*" in the Commission communication (17535/08), as follows:

**Strategic objective 1: Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality:** Lifelong learning strategies;

European Qualifications Framework; Expanding learning mobility.

**Strategic objective 2: Improving the quality and efficiency of provision and outcomes:**

Languages; Professional development of teachers and trainers; Governance and funding;

Basic skills in reading, mathematics and science;

"New Skills for New Jobs".

**Strategic objective 3: Promoting equity and active citizenship:** Early school leaving; Pre-primary education; Migrants; Learners with special needs.

**Strategic objective 4: Enhancing innovation and creativity, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training:** Transversal key competences; Innovation-friendly institutions; Partnership.

Similarly, the outcomes of European cooperation call for a coherent and systematic approach to joint work. In the field of mutual learning - one of the most visible elements of the OMC in education and training - dynamic and mutually beneficial progress towards common objectives could best be ensured by establishing a clear relationship between the medium-term priorities defined at ministerial level on the basis of the Commission proposal and the themes chosen for Peer Learning Activities (PLAs), which may take place in various forms and at various levels (e.g. expert working groups, high-level panels, expert fora, etc.)

Finally, in order to ensure greater efficiency, overall added value and better dissemination of results, PLAs need to be based on a clear set of principles<sup>5</sup>, reporting mechanisms should be adjusted in line with the flexible approach outlined above and this whole process of cooperation needs to be supported by the better involvement of stakeholders, the use of related agencies, networks, expert groups and international organisations and use of Community programmes, such as the Lifelong Learning Programme.



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<sup>5</sup> These may be summarised as follows:

- (i) all groups should receive a clear and detailed mandate for their work, with the expected outcomes of the work being defined from the start;
- (ii) guidelines should be laid down for the target profile of Member States' representatives on the groups;
- (iii) specific timeframes and work plans should be established;
- (iv) better dissemination of outcomes should be ensured, including better information for policy- and decision-makers.