

UNICE position paper on the Commission communication "Towards a Europe of Knowledge" (COM (97) 563 final)

General Comments

UNICE has taken note of the Commission's communication "Towards a Europe of Knowledge" and understands that this document is intended to set out the guidelines for future Community action in the areas of education, training and youth for the period 2000 to 2006. UNICE welcomes the revision of the programmes as an opportunity to refine the objectives and implementation of Community actions in these areas and wishes to be actively involved in the development of future actions in the field of education and training programmes.

The following comments are intended to give an initial response to the document "Towards a Europe of Knowledge", and will be followed by more detailed comments on the Commission's specific proposals when they are made available.

Content

1. The Commission communication is based on the guiding principle of the "gradual construction of an open and dynamic European educational area". While supporting the concept in principle, UNICE believes that greater clarity is needed to ensure that the concept is acceptable in practice. In no way should the policy attempt to achieve a harmonised European education and training system. Each Member State has the responsibility to develop its own educational policy to meet its particular circumstances, and should have the freedom to enter into bi-lateral agreements where useful and possible. European level action is welcome where it promotes an educational area which encourages mobility of people involved in education and training and which facilitates the exchange of best practice and innovation.
2. The Commission communication is based on three dimensions - knowledge, citizenship and competence. UNICE particularly welcomes the emphasis the communication puts on competence. As stated in UNICE's strategy on education and training*, competence

development must be demand-driven in order to be effective. Two aspects of competence should be underlined - the need for companies to maintain the competitive edge through enhancement of competencies and the need for individuals to constantly develop their employability. These two aspects should not be seen as being contradictory, rather as being mutually enhancing.

3. As regards life long learning, the different needs of various groups of people should be carefully taken into consideration. Because of the rapidly changing needs of the labour market and the ageing of the European workforce, the scope of adult education and training should be extended in the new programmes.
4. The promotion of mobility in the area of education and training should continue to be one of the priorities for all categories concerned - not only students, teachers and researchers, but also training providers working in companies as well as apprentices.
5. UNICE supports more intensive use of new information and communication technologies within future programmes, both as a tool to facilitate learning and also as a means to promote transnational co-operation.

Structures and procedures

6. Employers welcome the Commission's intention to focus new actions on a limited number of objectives, with more focused activities. The current complicated system of multiple objectives and annual priorities severely reduces the transparency of the programmes and ultimately constitutes an obstacle to companies' participation in the programmes. More focused activities would also contribute to more effective dissemination of results, which is an important element in need of improvement in the new programmes.
7. Of fundamental importance to UNICE is the need to simplify the administrative procedures in the new programmes. Companies' involvement in the programmes requires a rationalisation of application procedures, reduction in decision-making time and quicker payments. Companies may also need extra help in finding transnational partners, an element which is perhaps not such an obstacle for more institutional participants in the programme. All these elements are especially true for SMEs. UNICE supports the Commission's move towards a greater degree of decentralisation in management structures.
8. UNICE welcomes coherence and complementarity between the programmes in terms of priorities and possible structures. However, UNICE considers that the programmes which follow Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates should be kept as separate entities, based on separate, though mutually coherent, legal instruments. This is particularly important to ensure that the different issues in the areas of education and training are not confused by being put together in one programme and that the social partners' voice as actors in the development of vocational training is not diluted or undermined.

9. UNICE supports the partnership approach put forward by the Commission, combined with better consultation of the parties involved. UNICE believes that it should enjoy full participation in any future management committees and that employers should be actively involved in the co-ordination and monitoring committees at national level.

10. Programmes carried out before the Leonardo da Vinci programmes specifically targeted the needs and therefore the participation of companies. Such an emphasis was diminished in the Leonardo da Vinci programme, particularly for finance allocated for continuing training. UNICE would like to see a certain percentage of future funding to be ring-fenced for the specific use and needs of companies alone.

* Objectives and Strategy in Education and Training,
UNICE position paper, 23 December 1996