

COMMISSION MEMORANDUM ON LIFELONG LEARNING
UNICE POSITION PAPER

Executive summary

With its emphasis on the knowledge economy, the Lisbon European Council has triggered a new focus on lifelong learning in Europe.

UNICE fully agrees that lifelong learning is essential to promote economic competitiveness, employability and active citizenship. It broadly welcomes the Memorandum on lifelong learning which aims to define a strategy for lifelong learning. However, it stresses that the main responsibility for developing lifelong learning is national. Only if training offers correspond to companies' needs will employability and competitiveness be enhanced. As there is no one-size-fits- all solution in this respect, the proposed strategy should include exchanges of experiences.

In terms of content, employers believe that the envisaged strategy should seek to raise the demand for - and reduce barriers to - lifelong learning, improve national education and training systems and tackle high levels of illiteracy, and promote effective investment. How to meet emerging skills needs is a major challenge and increasing competences in new basic skills is important, but it should not be at the expense of traditional basic skills.

Employers are committed to identifying ways to develop ongoing access to learning and skills development. They support the objective of promoting investment in human resources through formal and non-formal training schemes. However instituting an individual legal right to lifelong learning is not an inappropriate tool to widen access to learning. Instead one should focus on the more practical questions of motivation, access and barriers to people – particularly the low qualified – upgrading their skills. To be effective, the strategy for lifelong learning should give priority to tackling issues such as the lack of interest among individuals, time constraints, course fees and the lack of awareness of learning opportunities, etc. It should aim at promoting conditions that will motivate not only companies but also individuals, who also have a responsibility for their own employability, through incentive measures to encourage both financial investment and commitment to learning.

Diplomas, certificates and qualifications are important. The key challenge for the future is how to make competences acquired formally and informally visible and recognisable as this is a pre-requisite for labour and cross-border mobility.

A shift from a supply-side approach to a demand-side approach to guidance and counselling is needed. Everyone should have easy access to good quality information and advice throughout their working lives. Private initiatives, market-based services and social partners actions have to be taken into consideration as ways to accompany individuals throughout their professional life.

Employers welcome the emphasis on partnership. Social partners' agreements can be useful. However, other forms of cooperation or partnerships between players deserve equal attention.

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Introduction

1. With its emphasis on the knowledge economy, the Lisbon European Council has triggered a new focus on lifelong learning in Europe. At the end of October 2000, the Commission put forward a Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, which aims to identify a strategy for lifelong learning.
2. UNICE warmly welcomes this debate, as updating of knowledge, skills and competencies is crucial to the competitiveness of European companies.
3. The Commission proposes six key messages, which suggest that a coherent life long learning strategy for Europe should:
 - guarantee universal and continuing access to learning,
 - raise levels of investment in human resources,
 - develop effective teaching and learning methods,
 - improve the way in which non-formal learning is understood and appreciated,
 - ensure good quality guidance and counselling,
 - provide life long learning opportunities closer to home through ICT.
4. The memorandum aims at a framework of partnership that will allow to base lifelong learning on a shared responsibility among all players (Member States, EU institutions, social partners, local authorities, enterprises, individuals, NGOs, the world of education and training, etc.).

General comments

5. UNICE fully agrees that lifelong learning is essential to promote economic competitiveness, employability and active citizenship. Employers can broadly welcome the objectives of the Memorandum. However, they believe that the envisaged strategy should take full account of the fact that the main responsibility for developing lifelong learning is national and should be based on the following principles:
 - Develop a learning culture that reduces barriers to lifelong learning and promotes new basic skills: UNICE agrees that every individual should be able to access opportunities to learn and to acquire basic qualifications and key skills, in initial education and training and in continuing vocational training. Therefore, UNICE believes that a major challenge is now to find how to raise the demand for, broaden the access and reduce barriers to, lifelong learning and new basic skills.

- Develop national systems to take up the challenges from lifelong learning: The proposed strategy should put particular emphasis on improving national education and training systems and tackling high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy throughout Europe.
 - Give a comprehensive view of resources used for lifelong learning systems in education and training, and in learning at the work place: Whilst sustained investment in education and training is key, the real priority is to make sure that investment is effective and efficient. The proposed strategy should therefore aim at promoting effective and efficient investment in human resources.
 - Underline the necessity for the individual to take up responsibility for lifelong learning: In addition to asking employers to meet skills needs, it is critical to put great emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals for their own employability and lifelong learning.
6. Finally, some of the terminology used in the memorandum is confusing and some proposed concepts should be clarified. For example, the reference to “lifewide” learning is confusing. The delineation between ‘non-formal’ and ‘informal’ learning is also difficult to understand. UNICE believes that it would be better to stick to the terminology of “lifelong learning” and to the distinction between “formal” and “non-formal” learning.

Detailed comments

Key message 1: new basic skills for all

What can be done to cope with ceaseless demands to adapt existing curricula to new needs?

7. In a world characterised by continuous change, school and college curricula must constantly adapt to new needs. One way of coping with this pressure is to ensure that foundation education and training effectively equip people with basic skills that will allow them to learn throughout their working lives. These basic skills include:
- values and attitudes that are needed to participate actively in economic and social activities which are an integral part of working,
 - numeracy and literacy,
 - key skills (social skills, ICT skills, problem-solving skills),
 - intercultural skills including language skills.

Periodically checking that the content of curricula is adequate to equip people with basic skills will always be necessary. However, if the basic skills content is broadly appropriate, it will be easier to focus efforts on those aspects of curricula designed to equip people with up-to-date job specific skills, which usually require more frequent updating.

8. Finally, European employers would like to emphasise that, while they strongly support the Commission’s plea to increase competences in “new” basic skills, this should not be at the expense of traditional basic skills, where there are still serious problems. The levels of illiteracy and innumeracy in many Member States remain too high. Governments must tackle this issue without delay. Failing that, ambitious initiatives to upgrade “new” basic skills, or any type of lifelong learning, have a slim prospect of success.

Can an individual right to life long learning be envisaged?

9. UNICE feels that access to lifelong learning should be promoted. It is committed to identifying ways to develop ongoing access to learning and developing skills. However the European employers are opposed to instituting an individual legal right to lifelong learning as it is an inappropriate tool to widen access to learning, for three main reasons:
- Firstly, it is highly probable that the people who would make use of an individual legal right to lifelong learning would not be those most in need of better access to education and training opportunities. This is backed up by evidence from those Member States, which do operate rights to time off to study, and where the higher skilled employees predominantly take up rights to training.
 - Secondly, the type of training undertaken under such schemes often has little direct relevance to the workplace.
 - Thirdly, it is difficult to see how it would be possible to give effect to such an individual legal right, as it is unclear who would have responsibility for it. For example, if individuals believed their 'right' to lifelong learning had been violated, who would they take a case against?
10. Given that an individual legal right to lifelong learning would not reach the appropriate target groups (i.e. low-skilled) and would be extremely difficult to put into legal effect, UNICE recommends a focus on the more practical questions of motivation, access and barriers to people – particularly the low-qualified – upgrading their skills.
11. Employee skills development is a shared responsibility of the employer and the individual. This means that the aim of a strategy for lifelong learning is to create the conditions that will motivate companies and individuals to live up to their responsibility. Research stresses that the lack of interest of individuals themselves is a key barrier to skills development. Other obstacles to learning include the constraints of time, course fees and lack of awareness of learning opportunities. Any strategy for lifelong learning should give priority to tackling these obstacles.

How can access to adult vocational training be improved, in particular for older workers, part-timers, temporary workers and the unemployed?

12. The Memorandum stresses the importance of improving access to adult vocational training, in particular for older workers, part-timers, temporary workers and the unemployed. UNICE believes that the best way to achieve this would be through identification of the practical obstacles encountered by these categories of workers in each country, followed by monitoring and sharing experiences on solutions found in each individual Member State.
13. Concerning part-time work and temporary work, the memorandum establishes a link between the flexibility of working time stemming from these forms of work and the possibility to expand time for learning. UNICE agrees that this link exists in specific cases. However, employers would also like to stress that part-time work and temporary work are a way to avoid unnecessary career breaks and, hence, are a tool for informal learning. Facilitating these flexible forms of work must therefore be taken into consideration in the context of a strategy for lifelong learning.

What could be effective ways of monitoring and meeting emerging skills needs?

14. Only if training offers corresponds to companies' needs will employability and competitiveness be enhanced. The Memorandum therefore rightly raises the question of monitoring and meeting emerging skills needs. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. A strategy for lifelong learning should include exchange of experiences.
15. The newly created observatory of change on the one hand, and the high level task force on mobility and skills on the other hand, could be useful tools to help identifying some trends in terms of emerging skills needs. However, UNICE would like to stress that
 - the company level is crucial to identify competences and skills needs;
 - the further you move away from the enterprise, the more difficult it is to predict skills needs;
 - inaccurate forecasts can have the devastating effect of producing, instead of preventing, unemployment.

Extreme caution should therefore be recommended when drawing conclusions from identified emerging needs.

Key message 2: more investment in human resources

16. UNICE fully supports the objective of promoting investment in human resources. However, the figures available only trace investment in formal training schemes and therefore do not reflect the investment in human resources in non-formal learning spent by companies and individuals. Ways must be found to make that investment transparent in order to reflect a total investment in human resources. Moreover the issue of how to improve the outcomes of investment is more important than a simple quantitative approach.
17. UNICE agrees that:
 - it is necessary to rethink what counts as investment in order to promote investment in human resources,
 - no single solution is feasible, or desirable in this respect,
 - benchmarking good national practices could help spread innovative solutions across Europe.
18. The memorandum refers to a variety of interesting incentive measures aimed at encouraging both financial investment and commitment to learning. UNICE fully supports this approach.
19. No fiscal restraints should be put on companies' or individuals' investment in human resources. Fiscal incentives to investment in this field are the competence of governments. Decisions on accounting rules and fiscal regimes are not part of the negotiating competences of social partners. Social partners's agreements would therefore not be an appropriate form of action in these fields.
20. Instituting a European award for innovative initiatives to that effect could add value. As the Commission rightly says, encouraging and enabling individuals to co-fund and take control of their own learning is crucial for success. It may be better not to restrict the

envisaged award to company initiatives only, so as not to exclude relevant initiatives by other players.

21. UNICE welcomes the emphasis on partnership in the document. Social partners agreements can have an important impact on learning. However, negotiating on training is only a part of a lifelong learning strategy and other forms of cooperation or partnerships between players deserve equal attention.

Key message 3: innovation in teaching and learning

22. ICT-based learning offers great potential and deserves special attention when a lifelong learning strategy is being developed. For companies, they can reduce the cost of learning and optimise investment in human resources. For individuals, learning at a distance allows to optimise the use of the time devoted to training and can reduce obstacles to people engaging in training activities.
23. However, as the memorandum rightly points out, learning is ultimately a social process and the fact that a work has to do with teaching and learning is often not recognised explicitly. Consideration within the strategy of lifelong learning should therefore be given to develop a better understanding of the implications of distance learning as a social process.

Key message 4: valuing learning

24. UNICE fully agrees that an important task of education and training systems is to make learning visible and recognisable. Diplomas, certificates and qualifications are important and having transparent and easily recognisable qualifications is a pre-requisite for labour mobility. However, contrary to what is stated in the memorandum, UNICE is not convinced that the rising importance of this issue is due to “a much higher demand for recognised learning than before”. Rather, the perceived rise in demand seems due to the fact that a rising proportion of competences are acquired informally and that existing systems are not designed to make them visible. The key challenge for the future is how to make competences acquired informally visible and recognisable. Employers regret that, despite explicit references to informal or non-formal learning, the memorandum seems to limit the debate to “competencies acquired in youth or community associations” and does not really propose articulated ideas for debate on this crucial issue.
25. Ensuring transparency and mutual recognition of formal national qualifications at EU level to promote cross-border mobility is also an important challenge in the context of a strategy for lifelong learning. Employers support initiatives such as the European credit transfer scheme (ECTS), Europass, European computer driving licence and development of a European diploma for basic IT skills. However, they have still some doubts about the usefulness of the European CV proposed in Lisbon. Moreover, if a European CV is to be developed, it is important to reinforce the convergence of this CV and the electronic CV of EURES jobseekers database to avoid any duplication and inconsistencies.

Key message 5: guidance and counselling

26. UNICE welcomes the fact that the Memorandum clearly states that a new approach to guidance and counselling is needed in order to ensure that everyone has easy access to good quality information and advice throughout their working lives.

27. UNICE agrees that a new approach on guidance and counselling should express a shift from a supply-side approach to a demand-side approach.
28. The public sector has an important responsibility in this respect. However, developing guidance and counselling throughout the working life implies that private initiatives, market-based services and social partners actions have to be taken into consideration as ways to accompany individuals throughout their professional life.

Key message 6: bringing learning closer to home

29. UNICE believes that this debate is linked to the debate around key message 3 and therefore both issues should be dealt with together when a strategy for lifelong learning is being developed.
30. Moreover, some of the ideas suggested in this section are still too theoretical and insufficiently thought through in operational terms to give meaningful answers.
31. Finally, while turning schools and training centres into multi-purpose local learning centres, UNICE suggests that innovation in teaching and learning and bringing learning closer to home should respect the priority role of schools and centres for their respective core audiences.

Conclusion

32. To summarise, UNICE would support a strategy for lifelong learning which takes into account the fact that the main responsibility for developing lifelong learning is national and based on principles developed in paragraph 5.
33. Employers believe that the issues raised under the six key messages proposed by the Commission are broadly the right ones. However, they would suggest a regrouping of key messages 3 and 6.
34. UNICE is aware that the set of messages proposed aim at defining a balanced strategy for life long learning. UNICE therefore recommends that a balance is maintained when conclusions are drawn from the debate and that the emphasis is placed on motivation and practical ways to reduce real obstacles to lifelong learning.
35. UNICE would like to draw attention to the ongoing discussions on the promotion of lifelong learning with ETUC in the context of the social dialogue at EU level. The result of this work will complement the conclusions of the Lisbon summit as well as the ideas presented in the Memorandum.
