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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Action Plan on Adult learning

It is always a good time to learn

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Heads of States and Governments affirmed in 1997 in the preamble to the Amsterdam Treaty their determination *"to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating"*¹.

In 2000 the European Council in Lisbon set the strategic goal for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based society in the world by 2010. A key element of the agenda proposed in Lisbon was the promotion of employability and social inclusion through investment in citizens' knowledge and competence at all stages of their lives.

The Commission's 2001 Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*² again stressed the importance of lifelong learning for all European citizens. One of the main messages was *that traditional systems must be transformed to become much more open and flexible, so that learners can have individual learning pathways, suitable to their needs and interests, and thus genuinely take advantage of opportunities throughout their lives*.

The 2006 Joint Interim Report on progress under the "Education and Training 2010" work programme, stresses that all citizens need to acquire and update their skills throughout life and that the specific needs of those at risk of social exclusion need special attention. Adult learning (both in terms of quantity and quality) is also important for the competence development of the medium and high-skilled people.³

The Commission's 2006 Communication on Adult learning⁴: *It is never too late to learn*⁵ highlights the importance of adult learning as a key component of lifelong learning. It has a key role to play in developing citizenship and competence.

¹ The Treaty establishing the European Community, http://europa.eu/eur-lex/en/treaties/dat/C_2002325EN.003301.html

² European Commission Communication: Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a reality, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lil/life/communication/com_en.pdf

³ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Towards Common Principles of Flexicurity: More and better jobs through flexibility and security, http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2007/jun/flexicurity_en.pdf

⁴ European Commission Communication: It is never too late to learn; defines adult learning as all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training

This Action Plan focuses on those who are disadvantaged because of their low literacy levels, inadequate work skills and/or skills for successful integration into society. Depending on the Member State, these could include migrants, older people, women or persons with a disability.

It starts from the premise that the need for a high quality and accessible adult learning system is no longer a point of discussion, given the challenges Europe has to meet in the coming years:

- To reduce labour shortages due to demographic changes by raising skill levels in the workforce generally and by upgrading low-skilled workers (80 million in 2006). Adult learning can contribute both rapidly and effectively to doing so;
- To address the problem of the persistent high number of early school leavers⁶ (nearly 7 million in 2006), by offering a second chance to those who enter adult age without having a qualification;
- To reduce the persistent problem of poverty and social exclusion among marginalised groups. Adult learning can both improve people's skills and help them towards active citizenship and personal autonomy;
- To increase the integration of migrants in society and labour market. Adult learning offers tailor made courses, including language learning, to contribute to this integration process. Furthermore, participation in adult learning in the host country can help migrants to secure validation and recognition for the qualifications they bring with them;
- To increase participation in lifelong learning and particularly to address the fact that participation decreases after the age of 34. At a time when the average working age is rising across Europe, there needs to be a parallel increase in adult learning by older workers.

The need to increase investment in adult learning is reinforced by the latest results for the benchmark indicator which show that adult (age 25-64) participation in lifelong learning is no longer increasing and, in 2006, has even decreased slightly to 9.6%⁷.

The Action Plan aims to help strengthen the adult learning sector in order to be able to use its full capacity. This is a complex sector, with a wide variety of providers, reaching all kinds of target groups. The cross-sectoral nature of adult learning is recognised.

The general objective of the Action Plan is to implement the five key messages established in the Communication *It is never too late to learn*: to remove barriers to participation; to increase the quality and efficiency of the sector; to speed up the process of validation and recognition; to ensure sufficient investment; and to monitor the sector.

⁵ European Commission Communication: It is never too late to learn, COM(2006) 614, 23.10.2006, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2006/com2006_0614en01.pdf

⁶ 6 million in 2005: Commission Staff Working Paper "Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training – Report based on indicators and benchmarks – Report 2006", SEC (2006) 639

⁷ Draft 2007 Progress Report

1.1. The consultation process

This Communication is the result of a wide-ranging consultation following the publication of the 2006 Communication. During the first half of 2007 the Commission consulted Member States through four regional meetings (in Finland, Germany, Slovenia and Portugal) of representatives of the ministries for education and employment, the social partners and NGOs for adult learning.

As part of each regional meeting and based on the key messages of the 2006 Communication, the host country presented examples of good practice to participants demonstrating:

- the results of an integrated stakeholders approach;
- how to achieve basic skills for low-skilled workers;
- how policies and actions for increasing participation in adult learning are being developed;
- the way implementation of the system of recognition and validation of non-formal learning outcomes is being laid down.

This sharing of good practice which took place in these meetings can be considered as a first positive outcome of the process.

The Commission also used informal “national sounding boards” in Member States to get additional feedback on the Action Plan from policy makers, social partners and NGOs in formal and non-formal adult learning⁸.

The Commission was further supported in drafting the Action Plan by a group of experts made up of representatives from the Member States, the social partners and international bodies such as UNESCO.

2. AN EFFICIENT ADULT LEARNING SECTOR FORMS THE BASIS FOR THE ACTION PLAN

The contribution of the adult learning sector to achieving the Lisbon goals and to life-wide and lifelong learning could be improved by the creation of more efficient systems, in which all relevant stakeholders are involved. The results to be achieved by this Action Plan also depend on the efficiency of those systems.

It is recognised that each Member State starts from a different level of development in terms of participation, quality, financing and the development of the sector. There are many examples of good initiatives which have been developed in the Member States with EU support which could be emulated by others.⁹

The consultation process and evidence from studies and research into this field show that a strong and efficient adult learning sector comprises a set of key elements that are strongly interconnected. These elements are:

⁸ In the consultation process 27 Member States, the 3 EEA countries and Turkey have been included.

⁹ ESF060603-ESF Support to Education and Training Background Document

- the policies adopted to meet the needs and demands of society and the economy;
- the structures for governance including the quality, efficiency and accountability of the adult learning system;
- the delivery systems including learning activities, learning support and recognition of learning outcomes which address the motivation and learning needs of learners in the context of the needs and demands of society and the economy.

Partnership at European, national, regional and local levels is required to improve the efficiency of the adult learning sector, to widen and facilitate access and to facilitate proper funding.¹⁰

2.1. Policy

The consultation restated the fundamental need for public *authorities, together with other stakeholders* to intervene to guarantee learning opportunities to enable those at risk to achieve key competences¹¹. This intervention is needed to ensure that adults who left school without adequate formal qualifications and who wish to restart or continue their basic education at any time throughout their lives, should be supported with adequate and innovative learning pathways and with opportunities for the acquisition of competences through work-based training offers. The need for such intervention is even greater in the context of the rapid pace of change in the workplace and in skills needed for success there.

Stakeholders found that compared to other areas of learning, the contribution and benefits of the adult learning sector are not well researched, debated or published. Furthermore, the development of adult learning opportunities is not keeping pace with the needs of individuals and society.

To increase participation and to encourage investment, it is crucial that the quality, relevance, efficiency¹² and effectiveness of adult learning be clearly visible.

Governments and other stakeholders should act, in their respective spheres, to facilitate access, to provide guidance and assessments, and to speed up the validation and recognition of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal and informal learning.

2.2. Governance

Contributors to the consultation were clear that good governance by adult learning providers contributes to effective adult learning provision. In turn, this results in quality learning outcomes for learners and good returns on investment for all stakeholders.

Good governance in adult learning providers is characterised by:

- focus on the adult learner;

¹⁰ Promoting adult learning, OECD, 2005, ISBN: 9264010939

¹¹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, (2006/962/EC), OJ L 394/10, 30.12.2006

¹² Communication from the Commission "Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems", COM(2006)481final, 8.09.2006, http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comm481_en.pdf

- an innovative approach to learning;
- effective needs analysis;
- efficient administration systems and appropriate allocation of resources;
- professional staffing;
- quality assurance mechanisms for providers;
- strong evidence-based monitoring and evaluation systems within national frameworks;
- close relations with other educational areas and bodies such as learner's organisation, branch associations and sectoral institutes. As employers are providers of a large portion of training to adults through work-based learning and providing a supportive environment, employer involvement in local and regional planning is crucial.

There is a need for a planned and systematic approach at all levels and within all elements of learning, formal and non-formal¹³, to improve accountability and transparency and to provide adequate confidence that adult learning provision will meet the requirements of all stakeholders, especially the adult learners.

2.3. Delivery

The consultation showed that a key challenge for adult learning is to deliver a service that simultaneously meets the needs of the adult learner, provides high quality responses to the needs of the labour market and society and stimulates further demand. Furthermore, a wide range of interconnected measures is needed to overcome the multi-dimensional barriers to participation. These include:

- bringing high quality information and guidance closer to the learner. This can be achieved through community- or workplace-based services. There was a strong consensus that this should be provided free of charge for the target groups in this Action Plan;
- bringing learning closer to learners in their communities and workplaces. This can be achieved through local learning centres, NGOs, workplace learning, e-learning. Differentiated learning opportunities should be offered, that respond to the individuals' specific needs;
- enabling flexible access to assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes, leading to certification and qualification; this should be supported by guidance;
- widening access to higher education¹⁴ in order to facilitate a "one level higher" qualification; putting in place demand-driven financial mechanisms (such as individual learning accounts, tax measures and loans provided either publicly or

¹³ For definitions see "Memorandum on Lifelong Learning" (SEC(2000) 1832, 30.10.2000 and further work as the Classification of Learning Activities by Eurostat

¹⁴ Flash Eurobarometer 192: 87% of teaching professionals working in universities in the EU agree that universities should open up for adult learners

through a public guarantee mechanism) to address financial constraints and to motivate learning on a full-time or part-time basis;

- encouraging individuals to invest in their own learning, both for reasons of personal fulfilment and employability. In this respect, adult learning is a powerful mechanism for language learning, in line with the Commission's strategy as set out in the 2004-2006 Action Plan for Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity.¹⁵ Guidance has a crucial role in helping adults to take advantage of the possibilities offered by companies, social services and other institutions.

3. ACTION PLAN

In order to implement the key messages of the 2006 Communication and on the basis of the views collected during the recent consultation the Commission invites Member States to participate in a European Action Plan for the sector consisting of actions in the following areas:

- analyse the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in Member States on adult learning;
- improve the quality of provisions in the adult learning sector;
- increase the possibilities for adults to go "one step up" - to achieve a qualification at least one level higher than before;
- speed up the process of assessment of skills and social competences and have them validated and recognised in terms of learning outcomes;
- improve the monitoring of adult learning sector.

The implementation of such actions can be supported through the use of the European Social Fund and the Lifelong Learning Programme.

3.1. Analyse the effects of reforms in all sectors of education and training in Member States on adult learning

The adult learning sector touches all the other education sectors. So it is important to analyse the effects of developments in other educational areas, both formal and non-formal, and their interaction with the developments in adult learning. Most Member States are developing a National Qualification Framework linked to the European Qualification Framework. The discussion on credit transfer is under way. These developments are focussed on how to facilitate access, progress and transfer and are thus potentially important for opening up qualification systems to adults. Quality assurance forms an important part of the reforms in education and training. Developments in the adult learning sector must be mainstreamed into

¹⁵ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006, http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf

the ongoing process of modernisation in education and training. In some Member States adult learning is included in the reforms; in others not.

2008	An analysis of the implication of national reforms for the adult learning sector will be commissioned, based on existing national reporting mechanisms. This analysis would include a cost/benefit analysis of these reforms to truly assess good practices. A complementary study will be launched if needed.
2009	The results of the analysis will be reported showing trends, achievements and gaps at European and national level. This will feed into the development of the Lifelong Learning Programme and other relevant EU initiatives.
2010	The Commission will report on progress; and every two years from 2010 onwards.

3.2. Improve the quality of provision in the adult learning sector

Quality of provision is affected by policy, resources, accommodation and a host of other factors, but the key factor is the quality of the staff involved in delivery. So far in many Member States little attention has been paid to the training (initial and continuing), the status and the payment of adult learning staff. Adult learning staff in this context is not limited to teachers and trainers but includes management, guidance personnel, mentors and administration. They have to be able to address the different needs of the specific groups. The quality of staff is crucial in motivating adult learners to participate.

2008	The results of the study <i>Adult learning professions in Europe</i> will be published. This will identify existing good practice in Member States and formulate recommendations. Good practice identified will be disseminated through Education and Training 2010 work programme and the Lifelong Learning Programme (for example by peer learning activities and job shadowing).
2009	Development of standards for adult learning professionals, including guidance services, based on existing good practice.
2010	Further research on the development of quality standards for providers and the accreditation of providers. This will also contribute to the monitoring of the sector.

3.3. Increase the possibilities for adults to go one step up and achieve at least one level higher qualification

Demographic projections for Europe suggest that investment in the human and social capital of the identified target groups is vital, seen the reductions in labour forces and the resulting labour market shortages. Information and guidance have a critical role to play in reaching and motivating these groups. The role of the media and their capacity to address hard-to-reach groups should be taken on board. So should the voice of the learners themselves. However, it is not enough to simply attract people into education and training. The opportunity for them to progress and to raise their qualification levels must be real and must allow them to better integrate in all spheres of life.

Member States should explore the possibility of setting national targets increasing the skill level of the target population.

2008	Produce an inventory of good practice and projects for reaching the identified target groups, enabling their progress and success, with a focus on identification of key factors for reintegrating people in the labour market, in education and training, and in society (voluntary work). Results from the Lifelong Learning Programme, especially those from Grundtvig will be taken into account.
2009	Based on the results of the inventory of research (2008), a call for proposals for pilot projects for reaching the target groups and for further exploration will be launched within the Lifelong Learning Programme to achieve the goal of one level higher qualification.
2010	Launch of the projects and the monitoring of the results will start at the same time. Member States should report on progress in raising the skill levels of target groups in the Joint Progress Report on Education and Training.

3.4. Speed up the process of assessing and recognizing non-formal and informal learning for the disadvantaged groups

Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning form a cornerstone in the lifelong learning strategy. Many Member States have a legal framework and most of them have set pilot programmes in motion.

Assessment and recognition of skills and social competences, regardless of where and how they are achieved, are especially important for those who do not have basic qualifications, in order to facilitate their integration in society. They will have skills that are not visible. It is important for all stakeholders (employers, governments, individuals etc.) that this is done, because there is evidence that recognizing skills acquired non-formally and informally could lead to important savings in time and money. It is therefore important that national governments adopt a positive approach to recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Special attention should be paid to the validation and recognition of the competences of migrants, without prejudice to EU law on the recognition of profession qualifications.¹⁶

2008	Identification of good practice of recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning with a special focus on social competences, mainly acquired outside the formal learning system.
2009	Peer learning activity at European level, exchange of good practice and cross border exchange of staff. This will be funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme.
2010	First report of results will be presented and discussed in a seminar and the results will be communicated to all stakeholders.

3.5. Improve the monitoring of the adult learning sector

As stated in the Communication on adult learning: *It is never too late to learn*, failure to demonstrate the benefits of adult learning is a major weakness of the field. There is an urgent

¹⁶ Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications, OJ L 255/22, 30.9.2005

need for a common language and common understandings to overcome the misunderstandings and the lack of comparable data in the sector. For a regular update (on a two yearly basis) of the developments in the sector, a minimum set of core data is required.

This action will have a strong relationship with the ongoing development and work on indicators and benchmarks¹⁷, including the work done in the Standing Group on Benchmarks and Indicators.

2008	Based on a study launched by the Commission, a proposal on consistent terminology should be agreed by Member States and stakeholders. The objective of the study is also to propose a set of core data to facilitate a two yearly monitoring of the sector.
2009	A glossary of the agreed terminology will be developed and produced. The collection of the core data will start in the Member States who wish to participate.
2010	The results will be published in the Joint Progress Report on Education and Training 2010.

4. FOLLOW UP OF THE ADULT LEARNING ACTION PLAN

It is time to guarantee the place of adult learning in lifelong learning and to secure its role at all levels of policy making, so that its contribution to meeting Europe's challenges can be realised.

A working group should be established by the end of 2007, to support the Commission and Member States to detail actions and projects under this Action Plan and take care of further implementation. The Council and the Parliament are invited to endorse the Action Plan.

A conference will be organised in the second half of 2009 to report on results achieved and to discuss the way forward.

¹⁷ A coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training. COM (2007)61 final.

ANNEX: ROAD MAP OF THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

- (1) **4 meetings of the Experts' Group in Brussels**, with participation of representatives from the European Commission services (DG EMPL, DG ENTR, DG JLS), from the social partners (ETUC, EuroBusiness), from international organisations (OECD, UNESCO), stakeholders and experts representing the 'four regions', and a representative of the European Association for the Education of Adults.
- (2) **4 trans-national consultation meetings with Member States, EEA countries and Turkey**, with participation of representatives from ministries of education and employment, social partners and other stakeholders.
 - Helsinki, 22-23 February 2007 Countries invited: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden
 - Bonn, 12-13 March 2007 Countries invited: Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, United Kingdom
 - Ljubljana, 26-27 March 2007 Countries invited: Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia
 - Lisbon, 3-4 April 2007 Countries invited: Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Turkey
- (3) **High-level consultation with Member States' representatives**
 - Heidelberg, 1-2 March 2007 Informal ministerial meeting
 - Hamburg, 22-23 May 2007 Meeting of the Directors-General for Vocational Training (DGVt)
 - Brussels, 14-15 June 2007 Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT)
- (4) **Informal consultation with Member States and other stakeholders**
 - (a) Informal consultation with "national sounding boards". National authorities in the Member States, EEA countries and Turkey were invited to organise national consultation with relevant stakeholders in the period 26 April – 22 May 2007.
 - (b) Further informal consultation at other events (meetings of social partners, conferences, seminars and roundtables on adult learning).