

25 June 2004

**VIII Conference of European Ministers of Education
"Lifelong learning, from rhetoric to reality"
Oslo, Norway 24-25 June 2004
Final Communiqué**

The Conference of European Ministers of Education which took place in Oslo on 24-25 June 2004 was the eighth in a series of conferences which started in Warsaw in 1997. The overall objective was to consider recent developments in both policy and practice in Europe from a broader European perspective, to learn from each other, respect diversity and to give impetus to making lifelong learning a reality. In addressing the theme 'Lifelong learning; from rhetoric to reality', the Ministers recognised that, in common, they face a number of political and practical challenges involved in transforming and modernising education, training and learning policies. Particular attention was paid to the question of how to utilise, increase and improve existing knowledge and competence resources in our societies.

Background

Human resources are Europe's main asset. Future economic and social development in Europe relies on its ability to efficiently utilise, increase and improve this vast reservoir of knowledge, skills and competences. The strategic goal of the European Union (Lisbon March 2000) to 'become the most competitive and dynamic, knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010' has been set in accordance with this basic understanding.

Policies on education, training and learning are central to achieving this strategic goal. They also complement and act in synergy with other policies (for example, research, technological innovation, employment, culture and social policies). The report 'Jobs, Jobs, Jobs – creating more employment in Europe' (EU Employment Taskforce, November 2003) underlines the crucial role to be played by human resource development in taking forward the strategic goals set in Lisbon. Workers and enterprises must increase their ability to adapt to changing economic and technological conditions; individual citizens must be enabled to remain longer in the workforce; human resource investments must not only be increased but also be made more efficient; and all stakeholders in society must commit themselves to a real lifelong learning strategy.

The 2004 joint report of the Council and the Commission 'Education and Training 2010' on the implementation of the Lisbon strategy in the fields of education and training, stresses the need to invest more and better in human resources. The development of common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, an important element of this strategy, aims at greater visibility and more balanced valuing of knowledge and competences.

Messages

The need to put in place Lifelong Learning strategies in European countries by 2006 (as requested by the EU Council) was reaffirmed by all Ministers, who stressed that while the costs of education, training and learning are generally explicit, the returns and benefits are often less visible and measurable. The outcomes and effects of investment in human resources must be made more visible and better accounted for.

The European Ministers acknowledged the progress made in developing and implementing methods and approaches for the identification and documentation of learners' knowledge and competences. A more systematic exchange of experiences and best practices should take place at the European level with a view to strengthening coherence and overall quality.

The Ministers acknowledged that identification and validation is an important part of realising the vision of lifelong learning. At the individual level, competences acquired outside formal education and training should be identified and validated in a systematic and coherent way. They recognised the important role of guidance throughout life in this regard.

The EU Council Conclusions (May 2004) on European principles for identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning should be used as reference point and baseline when exploring and developing suitable practical national solutions. The European Ministers support the emphasis of these principles on the entitlement of individual citizens to identification and validation, the importance of involving all relevant stakeholders in this process, and the need for quality assurance mechanisms to ensure credibility and trust.

The EU Council Resolution (May 2004) on strengthening policies, systems, and practices in the field of guidance throughout life in Europe highlighted the importance of access to guidance services to inform and support the lifelong learning of individuals and more strategic investment in individual competences.

Within enterprises, there is a need to increase the visibility of knowledge and competences. This need reflects the growing importance of human and intellectual capital to the overall economy. Closer cooperation between education and business sectors is of great importance in changing the perception of learning from one of expenditure to one of investment.

The development of methods and approaches to support human capital accounting and competence measurement in enterprises and economic sectors should be based on the exchange of experiences and mutual learning at European level. The need to explore further the role of enterprises in validating non-formal and informal learning was also acknowledged, as was the need to take these developments forward in dialogue between employers and employees.

At society level, there is a need to report more systematically on available knowledge and competence resources. Experiences in the field of competence accounting and reporting were presented to the Ministers, illustrating possible new approaches to supporting lifelong learning strategies. Ministers acknowledge the need to take these developments further within the context of European co-operation.

Ministers noted the importance of efforts to encourage dialogue, the exchange of experiences and practices at the broader European level as a means to strengthen cooperation and the connection between policy and practice. They welcomed the achievements of the Enhanced Graz Process/Task Force Education and Youth of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and its activities within the Education Reform Initiative of Southeast Europe (ERISEE). They noted in particular the statement from the Ministers concerned and look forward to enhanced co-operation at the European level on lifelong learning.