European digital content: quality, access, use and exploitation, eContentplus. 2005-2008 programme

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This Report concerns the final evaluation of the eContentplus Programme (2005-2008) established by Decision No 456/2005/EC. The Programme ran for a period of 4 years from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2008 with a budget of EUR 149 million, of which 100% has been fully committed to projects, studies and administration (cost related to the organisation of evaluations of proposals and project reviews).

The objective of the Programme was to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable, facilitating the creation and diffusion of information, in areas of public interest, at Community level.

Findings: the evaluators found that the Programme has contributed to making digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable, facilitating the creation and diffusion of information, in areas of public interest. The Programme achievements are in line with the objectives of the Programme. It succeeded in creating better conditions for accessing, using, re-using and exploiting digital material. The report notes most projects would not have been realised without financial support from the eContentplus Programme, underlining the usefulness of such financial mechanisms at European level. At project level, results such as the establishment of the European Digital Library Europeana, the common multilingual access point to Europe’s digital cultural heritage, would not have been achieved. The creation of this flagship project, around which some 20 ‘feeder’ projects cluster, providing access to around 17 million cultural items from more than 1500 European cultural institutions (directly or indirectly through aggregators), is a significant achievement.

The report notes that in the area of digital libraries, the eContentplus Programme is the first programme whose main impact has been to make material directly available to individual citizens on a very large scale. Indeed, rather than influencing stakeholders or making technical adjustments and standards which encourage or permit such availability, **europeana.eu** has become the access point for European cultural content. The Programme has also highlighted a number of challenges that have to be addressed:

- increased public funding is needed to finance large-scale digitisation, alongside initiatives with private partners provided that they allow a general accessibility of Europe's common cultural heritage online;
- fragmentation and complexity in the current licensing system also hinders the digitisation of a large part of Europe's recent cultural heritage;
- rights clearance must be improved, and the role and responsibilities of private and public organisations for digitising orphan works as well as material that is in copyright but no longer commercially available should be clarified.

Main recommendations: increasing demand for quality digital content in Europe calls for continued support at European level, in particular in areas of public interest where progress is likely to be slow and where access to content is limited by language and cultural barriers. A number of general points have emerged during the evaluation that could be indicative for future actions:

- funding should be linked to clear and defined policy objectives. Even if funding actions in other areas have positive outcomes and effects, focusing on areas where the EU has clear and defined policy objectives is likely to produce more sustainable outputs with a higher impact. The link

between the target area of cultural content/digital libraries and the i2010 digital library initiative is a particularly good example of this;

- the Digital Libraries Initiative should continue to receive economic support from the Commission to ensure the continued development of Europeana and similar services at European level;
- although Public Sector Information (PSI) has enormous economic value, it is still not extensively exploited. The implementation of the PSI Directive (Directive 2003/98/EC)should continue to be supported by activities that maximise the re-use of PSI in Europe and unlock its full economic potential. This is particularly evident in the area of geographic information where the fragmentation of datasets hampers cross-border use and prevents their exploitation for scientific and commercial purposes;
- in order to continue boosting the sharing of spatial information between public sector organisations and citizens, eContentplus follow-on activities should support projects helping to create a more standardised electronic environment for storing and harmonising spatial datasets covering one or more of the topics mentioned in Annex IIII of the INSPIRE Directive (Directive 2007/2/EC);
- both the multilingual and the multicultural dimensions of the Programme have been highly appreciated and the Commission should continue to emphasise such aspects;
- simplifications in the eContentplus grant agreement have been perceived to be very efficient, in particular the introduction of a flat rate for overheads and the payment of the Community contribution as pre-financing in instalments. The publication of a clear mapping of programme objectives and award criteria as well as the two-stage evaluation process have had very positive effects on the submission and selection of high-quality proposals. They should be considered for grant agreements implementing future funding programmes;
- best Practice Networks have proved to have had a significant impact on networking and practical testing by providing the most appropriate solutions and involving all relevant stakeholders. This funding instrument should be considered for funding activities that seek to achieve competitive and innovative solutions;
- in the educational content area, continuous action is needed to support the implementation of efficient context-aware brokerage systems and learning technologies standardisation. Actions carried out should focus on the use of educational content by specific groups (e.g. SMEs) in specific educational contexts while still contributing to global standardisation of learning technologies.

Conclusions: in recognition of the need for further support at European level to increase the availability of European digital content, measures to make digital content in Europe more accessible, usable and exploitable have been continued under the ICT Policy Support Programme (PSP) (one of the three specific programmes of The Competitiveness and Innovation framework Programme) since 2009. The themes included in the ICT PSP 2009 and 2010 work programmes as eContentplus follow-up activities seek to foster projects in support of Commission policy in the following fields: digital libraries; digitisation and online accessibility of cultural content, and digital preservation; access, dissemination and preservation of scientific information in the digital age and re-use of Public Sector Information. These areas have also been recognised among the priorities for action of the Digital Agenda for EuropeThe ICT PSP will continue to be used to support the policy objective of strengthening Europeana and supporting initiatives allowing improved accessibility of Europe's cultural heritage online, and will be used to encourage the digitisation and online availability of cultural material. Funding will be used to encourage public bodies to realise the objective of stimulating content markets by making their information available on transparent, effective, non-discriminatory terms.