European area of education and lifelong learning: strategy and priorities

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PURPOSE: to improve the prospects for lifelong learning in the European Union. CONTENT: in November 2000 the European Commission began a consultation process through the publication of its "Memorandum on Lifelong Learning". This Memorandum was triggered by the Lisbon European Council which set Europe the ambitious target of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. Education and training plays a key role in the realisation of this goal. This Communication is the result of a series of work shops, conferences and working groups held with interested parties over the past two years and is based on over 3000 written responses received by the Commission. The Communication notes that a knowledge based economy offers European citizens a number of opportunities. These opportunities, however, can only be fully exploited if individuals are sufficiently well trained and educated to embrace the advantages of modern technology. For this reason the Lisbon Council concluded that "lifelong learning is a basic component of the European social model." Instilling an enhanced model of lifelong learning is an interesting and by no means small challenge. Statistics indicate that in 2000 the proportion of 25-64 year old in the EU who had attained upper secondary level education was just 60.3%. This leaves a large gap (estimated at around 150 million people in the EU) at risk of marginalisation. At the same time, the "Labour Force Survey 2000" concluded that only 8% of the EU's 25-64 year old participated in education and training. Clearly thus, there is some way to go before the EU can match both the commitment and the level of investment for lifelong learning that currently exists in countries such as Canada, South Korea, Norway and the United States. In terms of definitions, the Communication proposes that the following four objectives/definitions should be presented when discussing lifelong learning: 1. Personal fulfilment 2. Active citizenship 3. Social inclusion and 4. Employability /adaptability. These objectives have been established to highlight that lifelong learning is important not only in terms of filling gaps in the labour market but also in terms of the value it offers for a more inclusive, tolerant and democratic society. To foster lifelong learning for all, the Communication calls on national, local and European levels to work together with the participation of interested parties. It also goes on to list the priority demands for learning as: - Literacy, numeracy, ICT and other basic skills. - Addressing the needs of teachers and trainers. - Addressing the needs of employers and SMEs. - Understanding learners' interest. In terms of "resourcing" the Paper calls for the overall rates of public and private investment in this sector to be raised whilst at the same time seeking new approaches to investment. A further strategy for the fostering of lifelong learning is improving access to learning opportunities. The Commission urges greater visibility, integration and targeting of lifelong learning processes. This could be achieved through: - Removing social, geographical, psychological and other barriers. - Adapting entry, progression and recognition requirement to takeaccount of non-formal and informal learning. - Tailoring measures and offering specialist provisions to meet any unmet demand. - Securing adequate investment by employers in their workforce. Lastly, a further plank in this strategy is the need to foster excellence in lifelong learning in terms of quality assurance, evaluation and assessment and or revision of strategies.