Programmes Socrates and Youth for Europe. Special report 2/2002 Court of Auditors

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PURPOSE : to present the European Court of Auditors Special Report 2/2002 on the Socrates and Youth for Europe Community action programmes. CONTENT : the purpose of the Court's audit was to assess the financial management of the Socrates and Youth for Europe programmes both by the Commission and Member States for the period 1995 - 1999, with an emphasis on decision making procedures, monitoring and evaluation. The Court found significant weaknesses in the conception and running of the management systems and the implementation of actions and projects. The Socrates and Youth for Europe programmes represent part of the Internal Policies of the European Union and involved payments for the period 1995 - 1999 of euro 998 million and euro 141 million respectively. Their purpose is to encourage co-operation and exchanges within the educational sector and in respect of disadvantaged young people within European Union, EFTA and applicant countries. The programmes have been renewed for a second period 2000-2006 with an increased budgetary allocation. The Court found that the conception of both programmes was overly complex, containing a large number of vaguely defined objectives leading to different interpretations and practical difficulties in co-operation between the beneficiary states. An absence of clear objectives and criteria hindered the effective evaluation of the results of the programmes by the Commission. There was no appropriate framework to ensure synergy with other Community programmes. The Commission managed around 30% of both programmes itself through a technical ssistance office (TAO). The remaining 70 % were managed by Member and other beneficiary states using national agencies (NAs). In its examination of the TAO, the Court found problems in the principle and form of the delegation of responsibilities by the Commission, possible conflicts of interests, risks to the Communities' assets and a high cost of management. The NAs suffered from the absence of an adequate legal framework setting out the precise division of responsibilities between themselves and the Commission. The Court also found that many NAs were not sufficiently resourced. The start of both programmes was delayed due to the late adoption of the necessary legal frameworks, a lack of adequate structures and the absence of an appropriate information policy. The complicated management systems and inadequate management of agreements caused further delays to the extent that prefinancing could not be realised and deadlines for closing actions set in the financial agreements were not met. Implementation was further hampered by unsuitable IT network systems. The Court's audit found shortcomings in the management of both the TAO and within the majority of the NAs examined. There were inadequacies in all aspects of the process from the selection of projects to the monitoring of their implementation. In particular the Court identified a lack of resources devoted to control and evaluation by the managing bodies. Irregularities were found in some of the individual projects audited, some of which raised suspicions of fraud and accordingly communicated by the Court to OLAF. The Court found delays and problems in the controlling and monitoring of the implementation and impact of the programmes bythe Commission and weaknesses in the evaluation process and reports. For example it was difficult for the Court to establish whether the objectives of the programmes had been fulfilled effectively due a lack of analytical data. The late completion of the evaluation reports meant that they could not have an impact on the implementation of the first period, or on programming the second period. In its Special Report the Court makes a number of recommendations for improving the management of these programmes. These include to replace the TAO with a Community agency, clearly defining the relationship between the Commission and national authorities, setting clear and measurable objectives, establishing effective implementing rules, improving control and monitoring at all levels and providing effective and timely evaluations.