Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems

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PURPOSE: to ensure high quality education and training systems that are both efficient and equitable.

CONTENT: in the context of public budget constraints and the challenges of globalisation, demographic change and technological innovation, greater emphasis must be placed across Europe on improving efficiency in the education and training sector. In 2004, 75 million EU citizens were low-skilled (32% of the workforce) but by 2010 just 15% of the new jobs will be for those with only basic schooling. Education and training policies can have a significant positive impact on economic and social outcomes, but inequities in education and training also have huge hidden costs which are rarely shown in public accounting systems. This includes income tax losses, increased demand for health-care and public assistance, and the costs of higher rates of crime and delinquency.

This Communication underlines the Commission's view that education and training systems are critical factors to develop the EU's long-term potential for competitiveness as well as for social cohesion. Investments in education and training take time to bear fruit so when deciding on spending priorities, governments should allow for long-term planning at local and national levels. This need for long-term investment planning underlines the importance of National Lifelong Learning Strategies, which Member States have agreed to adopt by the end of 2006. National and European qualifications frameworks will facilitate the validation of learning in all contexts. This is important for promoting equity because many of the least advantaged build up key competences and skills in non-formal and informal education. Ensuring that all learning is validated and transferable in order to remove "dead ends" in learning pathways is a gain both in terms of efficiency and equity.

The Communication emphasises the following main points:

1) Member States should develop **a culture of evaluation**. They should develop policies for the whole lifelong learning continuum which take full account of efficiency and equity in combination and in the long term, and which complement policies in related fields.

2) **Pre-primary education: focusing on learning at an early age**. Pre-primary education has the highest returns in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children. Member States should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels.

3) **Primary and secondary education: improving the quality of basic education for all.** The bulk of research suggests that education and training systems which track pupils at an early age exacerbate the effect of socio-economic background on educational attainment and do not raise efficiency in the long run. Efficiency and equity can both be improved by focussing on improving teacher quality and recruitment procedures in disadvantaged areas, and designing autonomy and accountability systems which avoid inequity.

4) **Higher education: improving investment while widening participation**. Free access to higher education does not necessarily guarantee equity. To strengthen both efficiency and equity Member States should create appropriate conditions and incentives to generate higher investment from public and private sources, including, where appropriate, through tuition fees combined with accompanying financial measures for the disadvantaged. Specific actions at school level are also needed. Higher education

institutions should offer a more differentiated range of provision and incentives to meet increasingly diverse social and economic needs.

5) **Vocational education and training: improving quality and relevance**. Member States should develop clear and diverse pathways through VET to further learning and employment. They should also improve public training programmes for the unemployed and for disadvantaged learners. The quality and relevance of such programmes can be enhanced by encouraging stakeholder partnerships at a regional and local level and facilitating private sector involvement.

Within the framework of the revised Lisbon Strategy and the "Education and Training 2010" Work Programme, the EU helps Member States design and implement their education and training policies by facilitating the exchange of information, data and best practice through mutual learning and peer review. Efficiency and equity will be a priority theme in this work and the EU will provide particular support to develop a culture of evaluation and to exchange best practice on pre-primary education. The Commission also intends to take forward work on adult learning, the development of a European Qualifications Framework and a European framework of statistics and indicators. This will be underpinned by research into efficiency and equity funded through the seventh EU framework for R&D.