Adult learning: it is never too late to learn

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PURPOSE: to present a Commission communication on adult learning.

CONTENT: education and training are critical factors for achieving the Lisbon's strategy objectives of raising economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion. The role of adult learning is recognised in Members States' National Reform Programmes. However, implementation generally remains weak. Most education and training systems are still largely focused on the education and training of young people and limited progress has been made in changing systems to mirror the need for learning throughout the lifespan. An additional 4 million adults would need to participate in lifelong learning in order to achieve the participation rate of the benchmark agreed by Member States in the framework of the "Education and Training 2010" process. Member States can no longer afford to be without an efficient adult learning system, integrated into their lifelong learning strategy, providing participants with increased labour market access, better social integration and preparing them for active ageing for the future.

This Communication highlights the essential contribution of adult learning, through the acquisition of key competences by all, to employability and mobility in a modern labour market and to social inclusion. It draws on lessons learnt from the dialogue with Member States in the framework of "Education and Training 2010" and from experiences gained in the existing EU education and training programmes, in particular the "Grundtvig" action of the Socrates programme. It recalls that the Structural Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), have the potential to support the development of infrastructures and strategies. It underlines the importance of certain specific issues: the gender dimension, in particular regarding data collection, differences in access to lifelong learning and in preferred forms of learning. It provides the necessary policy underpinning for the implementation of the future "Grundtvig" programme, which will form part of the overall Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. Lastly, it proposes a reflection on adult learning involving Member States and relevant stakeholders, leading to the formulation of an action plan in 2007.

Five key messages for adult learning stakeholders are presented:

Lifting the barriers to participation: compared with the benchmark goal of 12.5% participation in adult learning by 2010, the average rate in 2005 was 10.8%. There is remarkable similarity across Member States in the distribution of adult learning, with those with the lowest levels of initial education, older people, people in rural areas, and the disabled being the least likely to participate in all countries. The paper discusses the different barriers to participation by individuals. It states that the challenge for the Member States is two-fold: to increase the overall volume of participation in adult learning, and to address the imbalances in participation in order to achieve a more equitable picture. This requires targeted public investment to reach those who have been least well-served by education and training systems in the past. Increasing participation in adult learning and making it more equitable is crucial. All stakeholders have a role to play, but public authorities must take the lead in removing barriers and promoting demand, with a special focus on the low-skilled. This will include developing high-quality guidance and information systems, based on a more learner-centred approach, as well as targeted financial incentives to individuals and support for the establishment of local partnerships.

Ensuring the quality of adult learning: poor quality provision of adult learning leads to poor quality learning outcomes. The paper highlights the importance of suitable teaching methods, taking account of the specific needs and learning approaches of adults, improving the overall quality of providers, and improving the quality of delivery. Measures to promote effective delivery include availability of learning sites and childcare facilities locally. Member States should invest in improving teaching methods and

materials adapted to adult learners and put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify and up-skill people working in adult learning. They should introduce quality assurance mechanisms, and improve delivery.

Recognition and validation of learning outcomes: the learning outcomes should be recognised and valued, regardless of where and how they are achieved. Within the next five years Member States should implement systems for validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, based o the Common European Principles on validation and recognition and taking full account of existing experiences. Development of validation and recognition may be linked to the development of National Qualification Frameworks within the overall context of the European Qualification Framework.

Investing in the ageing population and migrants: the changing demographic situation calls not only for raising the average retirement age and but also for "active ageing" policies addressing life both before and after retiring from formal work. In addition, the challenge for adult learning is to support the integration of migrants in society and the economy, and to make the most of the competences and educational experiences acquired prior to migration. This should involve:

- EU support policies and action through relevant programmes for improving the quality of education and training policies in migrants' home countries, particularly the European Neighbourhood Countries;

- speeding up mechanisms for assessment of capacities and recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning of arriving migrants;

- expanding adult learning opportunities in relation to linguistic, social and cultural integration;

- developing appropriate and effective teaching and promoting more inter-cultural learning.

Indicators and benchmarks: in order to monitor the multiplicity of adult learning and to develop evidence-based policies, reliable data are required. The quality and comparability of data on adult learning must continue to improve. In particular, there is a need for better insight into the benefits of adult learning and the barriers to its uptake, and for better data on providers, trainers and training delivery. The work of the European Commission in this area, including Eurostat, should concentrate on making the best use of existing surveys and data, on improving the harmonisation of concepts and definitions, and on expanding coverage, frequency and timeliness of data. Reliable gender disaggregated data is required.

European Union action: the Communication argues that concentrating on quality, efficiency and equity would reap benefits for both society and the economy. Responsibility in this area lies with Member States. The Commission's role is to support them in their efforts to modernise their systems. The Commission therefore proposes that there should be dialogue with the Member States and relevant stakeholders to explore:

- ways of making the best use of financial mechanisms available at European level (such as the Structural Funds and the Lifelong Learning Programme);

- how to take proper account of adult learning needs in the National Reform Programmes under the Lisbon strategy;

- how best to involve stakeholders to ensure that the messages in the Communication are acted on in the diverse circumstances prevailing in different Member States;

- how to encourage exchanges of good practices through peer learning activities in the framework of the "Education and Training 2010" programme, including on the basis of the results of existing EU programmes;

- best approaches to improve statistical monitoring.

Based on this reflection the Commission proposes to develop an action plan in 2007 to ensure effective follow-up to the messages set out in the paper.