

EAEA statement on the progress of work in the Concrete Objectives Programme in 2003

2003

The statement of the EAEA

On the progress of work in the Concrete Objectives Programme in 2003 (draft)

We consider it to be a significant development that the Commission involved European stakeholders including among others the EAEA in the Concrete Objectives Programme through using the Open Method of Co-ordination. The EAEA is represented in 5 of the expert groups and has contributed to the joint work with a number of proposals.

Direct dialogue between the Commission and NGOs was established for the first time in the wide consultation process on the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning in 2001, which was resumed at the beginning of 2003, when the expert work in the framework of the Concrete Objectives Programme commenced. By mid-2003 a number of interim reports have been produced on the basis of work in preceding months, which will underpin further work and proposals to be formulated. Although the work done in the past six months may seem an insufficient basis to draw conclusions, it is worth formulating some of the experiences at this stage in order to secure the efficiency of future activities.

A new mechanism has been introduced in policy formation, which is a mutual learning process for all actors, and therefore by no means can one of the partners reproach the others with critical remarks.

During the short period available in 2003 the expert groups and the Commission have achieved significant results that are identifiable in the interim reports of the work groups.

The Working Group on Basic Skills, Foreign Language Teaching and Entrepreneurship concluded that all adults, particularly the less advantaged, should be enabled to develop and maintain key competencies throughout their lives. The group stated that there is an urgent need for research into assessment methodologies for adults with literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Working group H suggested developing open competence-oriented qualification systems that take into account learning attained in all contexts (formal, non-formal or informal) and proposed to establish bridges and assist individuals in combining learning outcomes from lifewide settings, including credit accumulation and transfer; another important initiative aims to introduce a set of common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning at a European level.

This issue is touched upon from another aspect by the expert group of educational investments, which stated that the validation of non-formal learning can help to make better use of individual investment in education and training through private household investment. Another element states that there seems to be a need for more and new statistical data in order to enable better monitoring of education expenditure, outcome and returns. It is highly welcome that the group recommends a need for more research in the education and training field in order to better

understand the relationship and mechanisms between financing and social and private returns for providing a solid decision basis for a better allocation and a more efficient use of resources. Working group A finally decided to include non-formal education after six meetings within approx. one year focusing only on formal teachers. The group recommended an extension of indicators and benchmarks since the existing scheme will not give evidence of lack of teachers, gaps in training etc.

The group will also discuss splitting up into several smaller groups, thus enabling a more active discussion, a better focus on different issues at the same time and with high probability leading to more concrete results.

Democratic values, participation and active citizenship education have been interpreted as active citizenship skills and competencies that are essential life skills.

Education systems should not only rely on decision making in parliaments at all levels, but also be open for partnerships and shared decision-making with the participation of different political stakeholders at local or regional level. It is also a relevant proposal to build up sustainable support structures and sustainable financial support for long term planning. Group G showed high interest in building up appropriate support structures for providers of active citizenship education at all levels in order to guarantee a sustainable high level of quality and independence. Another element is that the group accepted to involve more the concept of "social capital" over the concept and practice of "human capital".

Beyond the promising and positive examples a number of fundamental issues cannot be evaded.

The five main points touched upon below are the following:

- 1. Strategic objectives had not been released for profound debate**
- 2. It is necessary to continuously develop indicators and benchmarks**
- 3. Conflicts should be more openly explored and better tackled in "soft governance"**
- 4. Ensure that concise summary and understanding of the proposals are made and the edge is not lost**
- 5. The Concrete Objectives Programme cannot remain the internal matter of a couple of hundred experts**

1. The formulation, whether right or wrong, of the strategic objectives (3) and the associated objectives (13) had not been released for profound debate in order to achieve the necessary general consensus. It is a question whether the system of objectives, and especially, their grouping, is appropriate. (Entirely different objectives are mixed in some of the work groups, for instance in groups B, G and H.) It would be important to explore more openly the differences in the interests of various actors, especially in the context of economic competitiveness, social exclusion and cohesiveness. The logic of current activities suggests that first one of the issues (economic competitiveness etc.) is dealt with and arising negative consequences related to other goals are treated, so to say, secondarily. It would be a miscarriage of goals if the entire social philosophy of the European education and training systems were to be subjected to the labour market requirements of the market economy, which seems to be the trend in practice. The European Union is part of the world economy, where the most important trends in education tend to be directed by actors such as the OECD and the World Bank. Being under the pressure of

competition and exerting efforts to meet the requirements of the economy, the social model of the European Union is put in danger unless sufficient balance is created.

2. The system of benchmarks and indicators developed so far reveals the weaknesses of the present education and training systems. However, it is a serious issue to consider whether these indicators and benchmarks are sufficiently relevant to prospective plans and goals. The Concrete Objectives Programme did not set the development of new indicators and benchmarks as a goal. It is no argument saying that research conducted so far could not answer a number of questions and soft data cannot be considered as evidence and consequently; it is more economical to draw on existing databases. When formulating new objectives, it is also necessary to continuously develop indicators and benchmarks, and the argument that their development is costly and time-consuming cannot be sustained. It might be the case that it is much more expensive to increase investments in education and training along non-relevant indicators and benchmarks although there are only scarce concrete signs of this in the expert documents dealing with reform plans for financing education and training.

3. One focus of expert discussions concerned that proposals to be formulated by the expert groups are aimed at ministerial level; however, the outcome of the proposals should not be that "we are saying what ministers would like to hear". It is necessary to transform "soft governance" into a process where conflicts are more openly explored and better tackled and where the roles of policy formation goals, expert objectivity and social solidarity are better differentiated and reconciled. The discourse should be more pointed because there are no actors that would not have to face significant and complex challenges while the inertia and inability to change of the "well-established institutional systems" are also powerful factors. The representation of the formal school systems and universities is much stronger than that of non-formal learning or adult learners themselves, which will be gaining increasing significance in the future. Or look at the emphasis put on the significance of non-formal learning and its relation to formal institutional systems of education and training and compare slogans with concrete measures, plans, projects and changes actually made in financing priorities aimed at encouraging the development of non-formal learning. There is powerful rhetoric but much weaker actions.

4. The transparency of the course of the process also poses a problem for participants. The interim reports produced so far contain a number of progressive and important new proposals. However, what is the way to ensure that when concise summary and understanding of the proposals are made, the edge is not lost and it is not the will of authorities that determines prioritisation either in the offices of the Commission or in the ministries back home. The structure to collect "case studies" of good practices has to be clearly set out to clarify their purpose and to have consonance between different groups so that they can be summarised and put into the overall report, which seems to be problematic at this stage.

5. Expert activities should also be conducted in smaller group work to a greater extent and there should be more diverse forms of working together and interaction including cross work group consultations (seminars, conferences, workshops, dialogues). In many cases at present, it seems that representatives of ministries have ad hoc authorisation and the role they play is rather like that of observers to give feedback and it is the Commission, working according to a schedule and under pressure, that "commands".

It is also necessary to widen the circle of those involved in the process and to develop the methods of dialogue. The Concrete Objectives Programme cannot remain the internal matter of a couple of hundred experts. In order to attain the goals aimed at, millions of teachers, tutors, heads of institutions are to be involved and convinced in 25 and later on 27 member-states. Furthermore, if we are truly committed to the learner-centred approach of lifelong learning, it is obviously necessary to directly inform and involve citizens themselves. The data of the first public opinion surveys of the Eurostat-CEDEFOP conducted in the field of lifelong learning indicate that citizens have clear notions and ideas about the importance of learning. The voice of learners and their organisations, including socially excluded groups, disabled groups and non-traditional learners in general, should also be heard in the process.

It is extremely difficult to briefly evaluate this process that contains a lot of values and involves a great deal of work, and to formulate a summary judgement. As the process is to be continued these recommendations, which take just a few minutes to study, aim to promote that the process becomes even more open, courageous and unobstructed.

The EAEA is ready to analyse these experiences more profoundly with the participants and the Commission and put forth more concrete and detailed proposals in order to make further co-operation more efficient.

The recommendations formulated by the EAEA were debated on and approved by their participants delegated to the expert groups and the board of the EAEA.

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