



COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

Brussels, 06.01.1999  
SEC(1998) 2236 final

98/ 0195 (COD)

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION  
TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

**Common position of the Council concerning the proposal for a Commission decision  
establishing the second phase of the Community education action programme  
SOCRATES**

pursuant to the second subparagraph of Article 189 b (2) of the EC-Treaty

## 1. BACKGROUND

- Adoption of the proposal by the Commission  
27 May 1998<sup>1</sup>.
- Forwarding of the proposal to the Parliament and the Council  
28 August 1998
- Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee  
15 October 1998<sup>2</sup>
- Opinion of the European Parliament at the first reading  
5 November 1998<sup>3</sup>
- Opinion of the Committee of the Regions  
19 November 1998<sup>4</sup>
- Forwarding of the amended proposal  
2 December 1998<sup>5</sup>
- Date of adoption of the common position  
21 December 1998<sup>6</sup>

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE COMMISSION PROPOSAL

On 27 May 1998 the Commission adopted its proposals for a decision for the renewal of the SOCRATES and LEONARDO DA VINCI programmes and the establishment of the new YOUTH programme which incorporates European Voluntary Service and the Youth for Europe Programme. The proposal for the second phase of the SOCRATES programme (2000-2004) is thus part of a three-proposal package designed to extend and expand the previous generation of action programmes which will end on 31 December 1999.

This more integrated approach follows on from the Commission's strategy guidelines set out in Agenda 2000 and in its November 1997 Communication "*Towards a Europe of knowledge*" (COM(97) 563 final).

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<sup>1</sup> COM (1998) 329 final - 98/0195 (COD) of 27 May 1998

<sup>2</sup> ESC 1307/98 of 15 October 1998

<sup>3</sup> EP 374/8

<sup>4</sup> COR 226/98 of 19 November 1998

<sup>5</sup> COM (1998) 719 final of 2 December 1998

<sup>6</sup>

The SOCRATES programme seeks to promote quality in education by encouraging cooperation, increasing mobility and building up the European dimension in all sectors of education. Actions 1-3 of the programme concern the fundamental stages of lifelong education (school, higher education, adult education/other education routes). Actions 4-8 relate to horizontal policies, e.g. languages, multimedia and information exchange, and to general issues such as innovation, dissemination of results and joint actions.

### **3. COMMISSION COMMENTS ON THE COMMON POSITION**

#### **3.1. General**

The Commission is gratified that the Council's common position respects by and large the substance and the spirit of the Commission's proposal. It notes that the Council shares the central objective of the proposal, which is to contribute to the achievement of a Europe of knowledge by supporting the process of lifelong education and training at all levels.

#### **3.2. Consideration of the amendments put forward by the European Parliament at the first reading**

The Council's common position is based on the Commission's amended proposal adopted following the opinion expressed by the European Parliament at the first reading. The Commission is gratified that the common position takes substantial account of the amendments put forward by the Parliament and adopted by the Commission, particularly with regard to:

- the explicit mention, concerning the programme's objectives, of the principle of integrating the dimension relating to equal opportunities for men and women in all the actions, including through positive actions;
- greater emphasis on references to the European course credit transfer system (ECTS);
- clarification of the arrangements on complementarity between the programme and other Community policies;
- consolidation of the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation the programme;
- the name "Minerva" to be given to Action 5 of the programme, which relates to open and distance learning and new technologies.

The Commission would nonetheless have preferred the Council to have taken on board the Parliament's amendments adopted by the Commission relating to:

- a stronger appeal to the Member States to remove obstacles to access to the programme;
- in the allocation of ERASMUS grants, giving a priority to students whose financial circumstances warrant special assistance;

- the inclusion of an explicit reference to the possibility of using the Structural Funds to disseminate and transfer the programme's results on a wider scale.

### **3.3. Points of convergence between the common position and the Commission proposal**

The Commission duly notes certain amendments made by the Council which are intended to provide additional information or clarification, particularly as regards the aims and operational content of certain of the programme actions. It is gratified that the Council shares the general principles on which the Commission's amended proposal is based, particularly with regard to:

- the overall structure and architecture of the legal instrument as a whole;
- the way in which the programme helps to improve quality, to promote innovation and to build up the European dimension;
- the rationalisation of the objectives and measures to be supported;
- the integrated approach designed to build up a Europe of knowledge and to implement joint actions with other programmes, particularly **Leonardo da Vinci** and **Youth**;
- enhanced coordination between the activities of the programme and the other Community policies and action;
- the grouping of the actions relating to schools and teachers under a single action;
- the opening up of the Community action to adult learners and young people leaving the school system without sufficient basic training;
- the inclusion of the possibility to support innovation projects capable of providing flexibility and of catering for new requirements.

### **3.4. Points of divergence between the common position and the Commission's proposal**

As things currently stand, certain significant divergences remain between the Commission's amended proposal and the common position. Although it has strongly defended its proposal on these points, the Commission has in the end accepted the compromise of the Presidency for the sake of a decision by qualified majority, so as not to jeopardise the subsequent stages of the decision-making process for which the timetable is tight.

- On the duration of the programme, the Council has opted for a seven-year programme. The Commission continues to feel that a five-year programme would have been preferable so as not to straightjacket objectives and arrangements for the Community action in an area which is subject to substantial change and which requires constant anticipation, adaptation and innovation.

- On the budget for the second phase of the programme, the Commission feels that the amount adopted in the common position (MioEUR 1 550 for 7 years) inadequately reflects the priority given to the area of education and training in Agenda 2000.

On the basis of these priorities, the Commission proposal considered MioEUR 1 400 to be necessary over five years. If the same same priority criteria had been applied to a seven-year period and considering the average growth rate observed, the Commission would have put forward a proposal for around MioEUR 2 151. The Commission is at pains to stress that these figures are perfectly consistent with the overall constraints of the financial perspectives under category 3 and the budgetary adjustments which the Commission has proposed to make in this context.

- As regards the inclusion of minimum thresholds per action to distribute the programme budget, the Commission feels that these arrangements bring in elements of inflexibility into the programme implementation which could seriously hamper its capacity to adjust to new requirements, particularly as the duration of the programme has been extended to seven years. The Commission nonetheless notes that the common position gives these percentages an indicative value and that an adjustment could be made sometime during the programme.
- On the project selection procedures, the Commission is still attached to the objective of increased simplification, efficacy and transparency for the programme's beneficiaries.

It considers, for instance, that the procedure described in point 2 (a) of section III of the Annex for part of the centralised actions complicates project selection and makes it more cumbersome. It risks increasing the time-lag between the submission of proposals and the notification of the candidates of the outcome of the selection procedure.

This procedure would provide for multi-tier evaluation of projects and could thereby lead to confusion with regard to the division of responsibility between the Commission, the Member States, the national agencies and the programme committee. The Commission intends to take the necessary steps to ensure that this procedure does not jeopardise the executive responsibilities of the Commission.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The legislative procedure can now, on the basis of this common position, move ahead constructively with the second reading in the European Parliament. The Commission considers that there is a solid enough basis for a final decision to be taken in time for the second phase of the SOCRATES programme to be operational on 1 January 2000.