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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION

**ON THE INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION PHASE
OF THE SOCRATES PROGRAMME**

1995-1997

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origin and objectives of the programme

The adoption of the Community action programme on education, SOCRATES, by European Parliament and Council Decision 819/95/EC (14 March 1995), set in motion, for the first time at the Community level, the implementation of an overall programme in the field of education. The text of the SOCRATES decision follows the guidelines and general objectives set out in Articles 126 and 127 of the Treaty of Rome as amended by the Maastricht Treaty. Article 126 describes the general objective of the Community policy on education as being to contribute

'to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity'

The SOCRATES programme is accordingly structured around an integrated framework of actions, sub-actions and activities relating to all levels of education.

Article 1 of the Decision states

"This programme is intended to contribute to the development of quality education and training and the creation of an open European area for cooperation in education"

The aim is thus to optimise the skills and competencies of the citizens of Europe so that they are able to face up to the demands of an increasingly globalised world, and to the challenges thrown down by new technologies and developments on the labour market, and also to fight against social exclusion and encourage the development of active and responsible citizenship with a European dimension. All this is part of a broad perspective of lifelong education and training.

Over and above these general objectives, the programme is structured around the nine specific aims of the programme described in Article 3 of the SOCRATES Decision¹, broken down into the actions and sub-actions of the programme.

During the different phases of evaluation conducted over the first two years of programme implementation, quantitative and qualitative indicators were designed to ascertain the extent to which these specific objectives had been attained.

The Commission is thus in a position to state that the programme has made a substantial contribution to the promotion of quality education and the European dimension.

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- a) to develop the European dimension in education at all levels so as to strengthen the spirit of European citizenship drawing on the cultural heritage of each Member State
 - b) to promote a quantitative and qualitative improvement of the knowledge of the languages of the European Union and in particular those which are least widely used and least taught leading to greater understanding and solidarity between the peoples of the European Union and to promote the intercultural dimension of education
 - c) to promote wide ranging and intensive cooperation between institutions in the Member States at all levels of education enhancing their intellectual and teaching potential
 - d) to encourage the mobility of teachers so as to promote a European dimension in studies and to contribute to the qualitative improvement of their skills
 - e) to encourage mobility for students enabling them to complete part of their studies in another Member State so as to contribute to the consolidation of the European dimension in education
 - f) to encourage contacts among pupils in the European Union and to promote the European dimension in their education
 - g) to encourage the academic recognition of diplomas periods of study and other qualifications with the aim of facilitating the development of an open area for cooperation in education
 - h) to encourage open and distance education in the context of the activities of this programme
 - i) to foster exchanges of information and experience so that the diversity and specificity of the educational systems in the Member States become a source of enrichment and of mutual stimulation

Moreover, the interim evaluation of the programme has shown that the specific aims set out in the decision and their conversion into SOCRATES actions and activities are consistent with the general aims of the programme and that they fit appropriately into the economic and social context of education in Europe. The problems observed are in most cases due to difficulties of information or administration which the Commission has already pinpointed and which prove inevitable in the initial implementation of such a complex and such a new set of measures as SOCRATES.

During the programme's first years of implementation, some documents published by the Commission have made it possible to refine and detail the objectives set. These include the White Paper "*Teaching and learning towards the learning society*" (1995) and the Green Paper on the obstacles to mobility in Europe (1996). Similarly, the contributions made by the work of the Study Group² and the preparatory work for the Commission communication entitled "*Towards a Europe of knowledge*" (1997)³ must not be overlooked in this respect. All this work illustrates the efforts made by the Commission to define and identify key concepts and how Community action is to contribute to quality education.

The European Year of Lifelong Learning (1996) and European Year against Racism and Xenophobia (1997) also opened up fresh prospects for the programme's activities, strengthening the aspects which were already present at the outset, such as equal opportunities and combating discrimination.

Nor should we forget, when speaking of the origins and implementation of SOCRATES, the solid platform of programmes and actions already pursued in the area of education prior to 1995. The incorporation into SOCRATES of the Erasmus programme (adopted in 1987) and the Lingua programme (adopted in 1989) (with the exception of actions targeting the world of work, which have been incorporated into Leonardo), and action such as those relating to the education of the children of migrant workers, has helped to create a solid foundation for building up SOCRATES. The expertise and prestige amassed have been key factors in the programme's success.

In addition, the public's response to the new actions in areas not hitherto covered by Community action shows that SOCRATES caters for genuine requirements which had not yet been met. This meeting of the expectations of the European citizen, in a changing environment, is one of the lynchpins of, and one of the major challenges for, SOCRATES.

1.2 Target public

SOCRATES has been implemented in the 15 Member States of the European Union between 1995 and 1997, and in those signatory to the agreement on the European Economic Area (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway).

Since 1997 and 1998, it is also applicable to nationals and institutions of Cyprus and certain central and eastern European countries (Romania, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), subject to the special conditions established under the association agreements signed with these countries. Provision for this participation had already been made when the SOCRATES programme was adapted⁴ and it is now envisaged that Bulgaria and Slovenia should also take part from 1999.

² Report entitled *Accomplishing Europe through education and training* Study Group on Education and Training December 1996

³ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions *Towards a Europe of knowledge* COM(97) 563 final 12.11.97

⁴ Article 7.3 of the Socrates Decision. The programme shall be open to the participation of associated countries of central and eastern Europe in accordance with the conditions agreed to in the Additional Protocols to the Association Agreements to be concluded with those countries concerning participation in Community programmes. This programme shall be open to the participation of Cyprus and Malta on the basis of additional appropriations in accordance with the same rules as apply to the EFTA countries following procedures to be agreed with the countries in question.

The SOCRATES programme is directed at a broad target public, for the European Union has some 145 million young people aged under 30, i.e. approximately 40% of the total population. Of this number, just under 83 million, i.e. 22% of the total population, were pupils and students in 1995.

Nearly 60 million of these young people were enrolled in the 305 000 schools of the EU, 36 million in secondary school, 23 million in primary school. In addition, some 10 million children were attending nursery school. Almost 4.5 million teachers provide tuition. Over 11 million students attend over 5 000 higher education establishments, millions of adult pupils follow full-time or part-time courses in order to update and expand their corpus of knowledge and skills. All these people, and all the staff involved in managing and administering education and similar functions, e.g. psychological and pedagogical backup and counselling, constitute potential participants in SOCRATES.

The wide range of the target public is also reflected in the number of categories of participants in the programme: teaching institutions at all levels, training centres for teachers, teachers, students and pupils for all categories of education, sectoral associations, trade associations and a number of NGOs, education experts, etc. This diversity indeed corresponds to the objectives of the programme which it is hoped should be able to reach all European citizens in an open area of lifelong education and training.

1.3 The current report

This report offers a summary of the main results of the programme up to 1997. The Commission in so doing fulfils the requirements set out in Article 8 of the SOCRATES decision:

'the Commission shall submit to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions before 30 September 1998, an interim report on the launch phase, and before 30 September 2000 a final report on the implementation of this programme'

The report is based on a series of evaluations and activity reports on the implementation of the different parts of the programme. It draws in particular on the external interim evaluation report put out to tender and completed between July 1997 and April 1998⁵, on the Commission's report on the first two years of programme implementation⁶ and on the preparatory document for the Commission's communication *"Towards a Europe of knowledge"*. Similarly, other part evaluations have been conducted on several occasions with regard to the actions of the programme. In accordance with the SEM 2000 (1992) programme, the point of these exercises is to strengthen a culture of evaluation within the programme and to improve the programme's operation and results.

2 IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Information

In order to take account of the specific information requirements of each participating country, SOCRATES national information campaigns were conducted. These included national conferences on the launching of the programme, conferences and seminars organised regionally and by sector, specific information documents and a range of publicity actions. The various campaigns were subsidised by SOCRATES under the terms of the Decision.

⁵ GMV Conseil Quatenaire Europool *Evaluation externe SOCRATES* 1998

⁶ Socrates: the Community action programme in the field of education – report on the results achieved in 1995 and 1996 COM/97/99 final 11.4.97

There was special emphasis on the dissemination of information on the new funding arrangements within SOCRATES. Particularly intensive campaigns were devoted to the introduction of the "Institutional contract" under Erasmus and to cooperation in the school sector (Comenius)

The success of these information instruments, campaigns and programme promoters is clear from the rise in the number and quality of applications in the second year of programme implementation

The Commission has also published a number of information documents on the practical aspects of the programme, its content, the submission of applications or the preparation of dossiers. Special mention should be made of the *Vademecum* (1995), the Applicants' Guides published annually in the 11 official languages of the European Union, and other documents (information notes, etc.) In addition, the Commission has produced, maintained and updated the SOCRATES site (including a specific chapter for each action) on its EUROPA Internet server

The external evaluation report suggests that the presentation of the SOCRATES programme in a single guide for all candidates could detract from the visibility of each of the chapters and that there should be separate guides for each target group. The Commission does not share this view and considers that this presentation safeguards and reiterates the unique character of the objectives and actions of the programme, and that it enables candidates to have an overview of the situation and where they might fit in. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless useful to publish, as the Commission does, specific publications on the different actions and targeting a more specialised public: annual compendiums of projects, guides on best practice, etc. These publications make it easier to draft projects and contribute to their improvement

In addition, the applicants' guides have made a considerable contribution to providing a clear definition of the objectives of the programme, the priorities in its implementation and the conditions of application of the actions. These guides have proved to be flexible and useful instruments which have been widely used to keep up a flow of information on the programme and to prepare projects

The SOCRATES national agencies have also played a major role in this information function, in line with what was initially envisaged. This role is acknowledged and appreciated by the programme's users. The external evaluation report states that 63.2% of participants in SOCRATES contacted their agency for information on the programme

Other institutions, organisations and associations have more or less formally also provided information and guidance or have been able to provide support in the preparation of projects. The associations which have taken part in the consultation meetings organised by the Commission indeed maintain that a "third level" of implementation is taking shape around the European voluntary organisations be they national, regional or local. These organisations first contribute to the attainment of the programme's objectives and the dissemination of its products

These achievements notwithstanding, the aspects relating to information on the programme have come in for criticism throughout this first phase. The external evaluation report studied the problems of dissemination of information and reached the conclusion that there are a number of different causes. These include problems of coordination and communication between the different partners involved in the programme's implementation, diversity of the organisational set-up of the SOCRATES national agencies in the different countries, insufficient resources within these agencies, problems arising from the cultural differences between the participants in a project. The external evaluation report suggests that a unit be set up to be responsible for marketing the programme. This would improve the coordination and effectiveness of information mechanisms

The Commission is constantly seeking to improve these mechanisms, their flexibility and their appropriateness to the requirements of the target publics. The Commission nevertheless considers that in view of the quality and quantity of the applications received under the SOCRATES programme, the criticisms mentioned in the external evaluation report on this should be put into their proper perspective

The transfer and dissemination of the results and products of the programme are issues which are indissociable from the promotion of innovation and quality and would appear to be insufficiently catered for in SOCRATES. The external evaluation report finds that one of the failings of many SOCRATES actions is that they make insufficient provision for achieving a wide impact and considers that a genuine dissemination policy is henceforth indispensable.

2.2 Administration and management

Three major structures cooperate with the Commission in implementing the programme:

- *The SOCRATES Committee* In implementing SOCRATES, and in accordance with Decision 819/95/EC⁷, the European Commission is assisted by the SOCRATES Committee which includes two representatives from each Member State and is chaired by the Commission. Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway are also represented on the Committee, their representatives having the status of observers in the conditions set out in the treaty establishing the European Economic Area. The mutual confidence established between the Commission and the competent national authorities represented within the Committee has contributed to the effectiveness of programme implementation and remains a decisive factor in its longer term success.

The European Parliament is kept fully informed of the work of the Committee in accordance with the *modus vivendi* signed between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 20 December 1994⁸.

- *The national agencies* These fulfil a number of management and follow-up functions for the decentralised actions, as stipulated by the contracts which govern their operation. Despite admirable commitment by most of them, difficulties have nevertheless arisen. The most oft-quoted criticisms relate inter alia to the proliferation of agencies in a single Member State, the low level of coordination which exists between them and the paucity of resources which certain agencies have to carry out the tasks expected of them under the programme.

The external evaluation of SOCRATES finds that there is too wide a diversity between the national agencies, not only in terms of management methods, but also in terms of the priorities they have been given and the resources (manpower and facilities) which are available to them and which depend on decisions taken by the national administrations. This situation is frequently at the root of the shortcomings observed.

Another factor is that the agencies make up a network in which the members must necessarily work closely together to implement the national partnerships. Communication and the flow of information must therefore be improved, along with the data within the network.

The NETY (network on education, training and youth) communications network set up by the Commission is making progress in this connection, but it remains merely a tool the value of which depends on its users and the fact remains that the weakest links may have an adverse knock-on effect throughout the network.

This is why certain agencies have encountered problems in organising information for the programme users, assistance for partners in drafting and following up the dossier, and assisting project promoters in seeking out partners.

⁷ Article 4

⁸ *Modus vivendi of 20 December 1994 between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission concerning the implementing measures for acts adopted in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 189 B of the EC Treaty* Official Journal No C 102 04/04/1996 pp 1-2

These problems have been particularly keenly felt in certain actions, such as Comenius, for which the problems are in part related to the newness of the venture which is not yet built up sufficient expertise

In short, greater consistency in the running of the agencies, better coordination of the work with the Commission and better-structured contacts between the agencies would make it possible to reconcile the requirement of decentralisation with the needs of an effective management enabling the citizen to derive the best advantage from the opportunities offered by the programme

- *The SOCRATES and Youth for Europe Technical Assistance Office (TAO)* A private organisation was designated for this task under a call for tenders in 1995. The external evaluation notes that the management of the TAO has proved satisfactory even though its work has been hampered by budgetary and manpower restrictions. The report recommends stepping up the TAO's resources and duties so that it can fully undertake its role of providing technical assistance for the implementation of the programme

2 3 The actual implementation of the programme

Owing to delays in the adoption of the programme⁹ it was initially necessary to provide a series of transitional measures which, in the case of existing actions, involved extending the previous system. The adaptation of these actions to the SOCRATES programme was not a smooth process, particularly in the case of the ERASMUS institutional contracts

As for the new actions of the programme, special procedures were adopted for the first project selection rounds. During these early months, the demand for these actions was limited. However, thanks to an intensive information and promotion campaign, demand picked up rapidly as from the second year of the programme. Accordingly, between 1995 and 1996 the number of schools wishing to participate in Comenius schools partnerships increased fivefold. Among these "centralised" actions, i.e. those for which the selection decisions are taken directly by the Commission, the requests for aid for new projects in the areas of continuing training for teachers, adult education and open and distance learning were up approximately 50% in 1996 over the previous year, even before taking account of applications for additional aid in respect of year two of 1995 projects ("applications for renewal")¹⁰

A criticism which has been made on several occasions in the interviews conducted by the external evaluators was the cumbersome nature and the lack of transparency of the procedures for applying for actions under the programme. However, while advocating simplification and better readability of the procedures concerned, the external evaluation report feels that such criticism must be considered and analysed with caution

2 4 Funding

The initial budget established for the programme was ECU 850 million, considerably less than the ECU 1 005 6 million requested by the Commission when it submitted the proposal for the SOCRATES programme. In addition, this budget had to meet the requirements of an enlarged European Community of 15 Member States and not 12 countries as was the case when the Commission put in its proposal

⁹ The programme covering the period 1 January 1995 - 31 December 1999 was not approved until 14 March 1995

¹⁰ If the renewals are included the rate of growth of applications for these three actions was 105% 97% and 78% respectively

This budget very soon proved to be insufficient to meet the needs. Already in 1995, the very first year of implementation, the total financial requirement¹¹ of over ECU 500 million was around three times higher than the budget available. The Commission's resolve to fund, at least in part, as many quality projects as possible, led to a cutback in the average amount actually allocated in the different actions of the programme. In adult education, for instance, the average grant fell from ECU 94 760 in 1995 for 31 projects to ECU 76 225 in 1997 for 55 projects.

In accordance with the joint declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission concerning the decision establishing the Community education programme Socrates¹², the Commission introduced a procedure to obtain an increase in the budget for the remaining period of the programme. After a series of negotiations, the European Parliament and the Council granted on a co-decision basis an increase of ECU 70 million¹³. Unfortunately, the problems in facing up to the increasing demand for the different actions of the programme continue.

The external evaluation report confirms this by stating that the financial resources allocated to the programme are clearly insufficient in relation to the scale of the objectives set:

"In view of the importance of education in the construction of Europe, the employment market and personal development and also in view of the ambitions of the SOCRATES programme, the budget allocated to it is far too small. On that basis it can reach only a small minority of the target populations and give the candidates selected in most of the actions but a small amount of help. At this rate SOCRATES will have no clear impact at national level for a long time."

Looking at things more from the programme users' point of view, the budgetary difficulties have had other effects. The students taking part in mobility activities have experienced a gradual fall in the amount of their grant. This situation favours students who have sufficient means to meet the cost of a stay in another country, and those from participating countries which give permanent grants or support to their students. To go into this issue in greater detail, the Commission is currently carrying out at the request of the European Parliament a study on the socio-economic origins of Erasmus students.

The insufficient level of funding given to schools taking part in Comenius 1 partnerships is also a source of concern. The period of budgetary restraint during which the first phase of the programme got under way and the problems these schools had in finding sources of additional funding, combined with the lack of financial autonomy for some of them, meant that the development of cooperation between schools and the implementation of many partnerships covering the whole of the territory of European Union were hampered.

For the activities managed by non-profit-making associations, the fall in the grants paid could well threaten not only the success of certain projects, but also could discourage the participation of these players who have a fundamental role in many actions of the programme, e.g. Comenius action 2, adult education and supplementary measures.

¹¹ For calculating the total demand under SOCRATES it was assumed that students under Erasmus action 2 on average asked for half the maximum grant admissible under the Decision less the ratio between the number of months spent in another country and a complete academic year.

¹² 95/209/EC Official Journal No L 132 16/6/1995 p 18. Two years after the launching of the programme the European Parliament and the Council will assess the results achieved by the programme. To that end the Commission will submit to them a report accompanied by any proposals which it considers appropriate including any concerning the funding set by the legislator within the meaning of the Joint Declaration of 6 March 1995. The European Parliament and the Council will act on those proposals at the earliest opportunity.

¹³ Decision No 576/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 February 1998 amending Decision No 819/95/EC establishing the Community action programme Socrates Official Journal No L 077 14/03/1998 pp 1 2.

This situation clearly works against the Commission's resolve to promote equal opportunities and allow the broadest possible participation in SOCRATES activities in every tier of society and in every region of Europe, and it is precisely at this level that the SOCRATES programme will contribute to building up the European dimension

The breakdown of the budget across the different actions¹⁴ was carried out during the first phase of the programme in conformity with the SOCRATES decision, attesting to the success of the operations to launch the new actions. However, this should not overshadow the fact that this pre-established system of distribution has been criticised by many beneficiaries for its lack of flexibility and fairness inasmuch as the system favours certain sectors of education, irrespective of the demand and additional aid required for certain new actions. The external evaluation report advocates reconsideration of the rigid structure of the budget and gradual adaptation to the demand stemming from the various aspects of the programme. While demand, which can vary considerably depending on local and regional circumstances, is an important factor which must be taken into account, it must not be the sole factor in determining the distribution of the budget. The policy priorities established by the Commission in conjunction with the Member States must be respected and sometimes demand must be stimulated in order to achieve these

Another source of inflexibility identified by the external evaluation when it comes to budgetary matters is the formula for allocating funds for decentralised actions across the different Member States. Greater flexibility is also needed in this area

2.5 Consistency and complementarity with other Community programmes

Given its field of activity and its aims, the SOCRATES programme needs coordination and consistency in its actions and activities with those of other Community programmes. In order to optimise this complementarity, the Commission has established close working links with the departments concerned, e.g. crossed participation in project selection, and measures have been taken to make sure that SOCRATES contributes to the attainment of the objectives of the other Community policies concerned

As stated in the decision establishing SOCRATES and as in particular stressed by the European Parliament during the negotiations which led to its adoption, the promotion of equal opportunities and the integration of disabled persons is particularly important in this context

With regard to equal opportunities, this approach is applied through various awareness-raising steps, by support for several projects relating to problems of equal opportunities and through the assurance that the principle of equal opportunities is strictly abided by both in the selection of projects by the Commission for centralised actions and in the selection of projects and people by the national agencies for the decentralised actions

Various approaches are applied to the problem of disabled persons' needs. These include close cooperation with organisations active in promoting opportunities for the education of the disabled, thematic seminars to encourage more institutions to develop projects in this area, encouragement to beneficiary institutions to provide effective support, counselling, teaching assistance and technical assistance to the disabled, giving priority to projects catering for the teaching needs of the disabled, the provision of additional financial aid to disabled persons insofar as the programme's available resources allow

It nonetheless remains true that as these two aspects are not part of the specific aims of the programme, it is sometimes difficult to cater for them and follow them up. In future, the study of these matters should be taken into account in a more detailed manner in the strategy for continuous assessment of the programme

¹⁴ The annex to Decision 819/95/EC points out that the resources to be committed under Erasmus shall not be less than 55% of the overall budget available for the SOCRATES, not less than 10% of the overall budget for Comenius and not less than 25% for the horizontal measures

The closest cooperation is obviously to be found between SOCRATES and the Community action programmes on vocational training and youth. According to the external evaluation report, the consistency of SOCRATES with the Leonardo da Vinci programme may be evident from the conceptual point of view but has nonetheless sometimes failed to avoid some degree of confusion between the users of the two programmes. In the European social context, the distinction between education and vocational training is somewhat blurred and for many beneficiaries the breakdown of tasks across the two programmes is unclear. Better consistency and more active cooperation between the two programmes and their management mechanisms should be an objective for the future.

The obvious relationship between SOCRATES and informal and non-formal education activities pursued under Youth for Europe III was not exploited to the full during the implementation of the two programmes. However, according to the external evaluation, the users can see a clear distinction between the objectives of the two programmes and show a positive appreciation of their respective results.

SOCRATES also has points of interest in common with other Community programmes and funds such as the ESF or the Fourth Technological R&D Framework Programme.

Initiatives such as the joint call launched in 1997 are a step forward towards better coordination of actions pursued in the common areas, which avoids duplication of effort and makes for maximum utilisation of the opportunities offered by each programme. This joint call was drafted on the basis of the report from the educational multimedia taskforce (July 1996), set up in 1995. It involved a plan of work common to a number of Community programmes, including SOCRATES,¹⁵ for the launch of a joint call for proposals in December 1996. The aim was to stimulate innovation at all levels, from technological tools to teaching practice, and to promote the cultural and European dimension in the area of educational multimedia.

This call for proposals was a huge success. 4 114 companies and institutions put in over 800 pre-proposals, 46 projects being finally selected in June 1997. This exercise enabled SOCRATES to promote many high quality teaching projects in the area of educational multimedia. Although the final results of the projects selected are not yet to hand, it can already be said that the cooperation established between the six programmes involved has been a success and augurs well for the development of cooperation in other areas.

Under this heading mention should also be made of the action plan 'Learning in the Information society' which was launched jointly by Commissioners Cresson and Bangemann.¹⁶

2.6 Consistency and complementarity between the actions of the programme

Taking the programme evaluation studies which have been carried out, the Commission has been able to ascertain that there is a high level of complementarity between the actions which go to make up SOCRATES, and a high degree of consistency of these actions with the general aims of the programme. However, the external evaluation report stresses that this complementarity is not always clear to see for all the users of the programme and that sometimes the differentiation between two actions, as in the case of Comenius 1 and Lingua E¹⁷ poses problems.

¹⁵ ESPRIT (DG III) TELEMATICS APPLICATIONS (DG XIII) Targeted socio economic research (DG XII), the programme of support for the development of infrastructures and telecommunication services TEN Telecom (DG XIII) SOCRATES and LEONARDO

¹⁶ *Communication de la Commission intitulée "Apprendre dans la société de l'information plan d'action pour une initiative européenne (1996-1998) - COM(96) 471*

¹⁷ The Commission feels that this is rather an example of poor information strategy as these two actions have very different objectives.

3 INTERIM RESULTS OF THE PROGRAMME

The Commission can already state that the SOCRATES programme has made considerable progress towards attaining its two general objectives "to contribute to the development of high quality education and training and an open European area of cooperation in education" In fact

*"the mid-term evaluation shows that the impact of the SOCRATES programme as a whole is already substantial and can only increase and strengthen during the second period of the programme (1997-1999)"*¹⁸

As regards the general objective of improving the quality of education in Europe, the external evaluation report points to the different dimensions covered by the concept of quality

"The vast majority of experts and players in education met stress the contribution of the SOCRATES programme to improving the quality of teaching in their countries (94% of those consulted)

While it is difficult to find among the people interviewed for this evaluation a specific definition common to everyone of this notion of quality, what we can say is that it implicitly relates to the idea of an improvement of the management of the systems (management of an arrangement, a structure), to their accessibility and to teaching and learning methods

Quality through cooperation is undoubtedly the argument most frequently quoted spontaneously by the experts and the participants in the programme As a major thrust in European education strategy (Article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty), it is widely shared by the education players in the Member States

The "contribution to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between the Member States" favours a comparative approach which is advantageous to the system and the educational players of the participating country

Thus, cooperation makes it possible to improve the practice of education players by drawing from elsewhere elements of "best practice" In addition and this is a particularly important point for many participants, transnational cooperation consolidates "good" practices in education in each country by fostering awareness of the quality of work done

Quality through innovation for many people interviewed quality cannot be dissociated from innovation This latter notion is understood differently depending on the country or player concerned but consistently relates to the idea of improving the system and practices through the introduction of new approaches or new actions In some areas transnational cooperation is in itself an innovation "

In view of the period covered by the interim evaluation, actual impact can be evaluated in terms of how far the specific objectives defined in Article 3 of the SOCRATES decision have been or are being attained This impact can be analysed by examining the specific objectives of the programme one by one, as follows

3 1 European dimension and European citizenship¹⁹

Thanks in particular to SOCRATES, the European dimension is already part of virtually all areas of education. In certain cases, this is the first opportunity the target public has to take part in transnational activities, while in others, as for **Erasmus**, SOCRATES has promoted and enhanced what already existed. At the same time, it guarantees the permanence of what has been achieved through support for the activities introduced and the institutionalisation of the relations established.

The volume of grant applications and the high number of quality projects have, from its outset, shown that the programme was being very well received by the European education community. The programme also encourages institutions to adopt a more strategic approach to European cooperation and to give it a far bigger place than previously in their institutional development programmes.

The incorporation of a European dimension in the educational experience of the citizens is one of the specific vocations of SOCRATES, including the promotion of a feeling of belonging to and taking part in a common social and cultural area. In this context, the results of a study on the contribution of the action programmes in the areas of education, training and youth-related matters to the learning of active citizenship with a European dimension clearly show the positive impact of the activities supported.²⁰ The biggest contribution of the programmes is the way in which they promote cooperation and transnational and intercultural exchanges, for, with the right support structure – these experiences trigger a deep-seated chain reaction of reflection on difference and diversity. The invitation to experiment using innovative teaching approaches was well received, even if it has not always been exploited to the full by the promoters.

The projects supported by SOCRATES stress the political and social dimensions of citizenship, encouraging the development of communication and intercultural skills, and cater in a balanced fashion for the cognitive and affective aspects of learning. The participation of (young or adult) learners in the planning and implementation of the project is one of the factors most conducive to the quality of the citizen's education process, a practice which is not always self-evident in the organisation of school and university life. Generally speaking, the projects which have an impact are those which include the multi-dimensional aspects of active citizenship, use innovative and participative teaching and learning methods, undertake to place European values at the heart of their concerns and judiciously mix self-direction and professional counselling/supervision.

If the actions in this area are to have a lasting impact, greater priority should be given to the 'training of trainers' and more durable synergy should be promoted in order to build on European achievements in the learning of active citizenship. Ways should also be devised of integrating projects and their players in multi-level transversal networks.

The external evaluation report states that SOCRATES, as a programme covering all sectors of education, fits into the Community strategy for developing European citizenship, targeting not only the younger groups, but rather the whole of the population through action such as adult education. Over 80% of the participants interviewed during the external evaluation maintain that SOCRATES contributes to the emergence of European citizenship.

¹⁹ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 a) *to develop the European dimension in education at all levels so as to strengthen the spirit of European citizenship drawing on the cultural heritage of each Member State*

²⁰ The results of the study are currently being published in all the official languages of the EU under the title *Learning for active citizenship*, Brussels/Luxembourg 1998. The final reports will be available on the Internet at the following address <http://europa.eu.int/en/comm/dg22/citizen> by the end of 1998.

3 2 Promotion of the teaching of languages and the intercultural dimension²¹

Improving the knowledge of the languages of the European Union was the objective of the former LINGUA programme, the incorporation of part of which in the broader framework of SOCRATES has strengthened the connection between language teaching activities and the other education sectors concerned, while at the same time moving forward towards innovation through new actions in the area of language teaching (e.g. the organisation of assistantships for future language teachers) introduced and implemented within SOCRATES²²

Between 1995 and 1997, 23 500 teachers took part in continuing training courses in the area of foreign language teaching (Lingua B), and 1 200 future language teachers were placed as assistants under Lingua C. Lingua action D created a large register of new language teaching tools which, without this action, would not have existed. New groupings of players have been made in order to develop and spread innovative practices in this area (e.g. integrated teaching of a foreign language and a non-language subject (CLIL) or multilingual comprehension)

There is a special mention in the external evaluation of the projects developed under Lingua E which enable two groups of pupils from two different countries to work together over an extended period, culminating in a two-week visit in the partner country

“Action E makes it possible, according to the teachers interviewed, to motivate almost all beneficiaries to learn a language. The added value is all the greater as all European languages are covered and as the action targets by way of priority the professional channels (accounting for over half the participants)”

The external evaluation report stressed the added value of these actions²³

“In terms of impact, LINGUA is () a success, in as much as 98% and 97% respectively of those taking part in LINGUA feel that the programme has made a major contribution to the improvement of the use of European languages and the quality of language teaching. LINGUA has also helped to bring about a change in attitudes (95% of those interviewed), particularly when it comes to the feeling of belonging to a European community”

Also noteworthy is the significant progress made by Lingua actions with regard to the promotion of the languages less widely used and taught. A quantitative analysis carried out recently by the Commission on the basis of data supplied by the national agencies confirmed this trend in the decentralised actions, particularly Lingua C and E

Although in Comenius Action 1 language is only a means of communication in compulsory education (unlike, for instance, school projects under Lingua E), the fact of having to use it clearly has enabled many participants to improve their knowledge of foreign languages

In more general terms, as the studies conducted reflect, any international cooperation project under SOCRATES presupposes encouraging language proficiency among the participants

Languages in the implementation of the programme

Operationally speaking, the knowledge of languages is a powerful asset in the development of transnational activities between teachers, trainers, etc

²¹ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 b) *to promote a quantitative and qualitative improvement of the knowledge of the languages of the European Union and in particular those which are least widely used and least taught leading to greater understanding and solidarity between the peoples of the European Union and to promote the intercultural dimension of education*

²² Opening up the programme to the associated countries of central and eastern Europe and to Cyprus has, it must be stressed meant a substantial increase in the number of languages covered by Lingua actions

²³ The evaluation confirms the need to improve language skills for they are vital to the building up of a European education area and on a broader level a Europe of citizens able to communicate with one another

Evaluation studies confirm the dominance of English as the language of communication between partners in a given cooperation project, followed by French, German, Spanish and Italian. However, this does not mean that the programme is not succeeding in promoting the languages less widely used and taught, for the value of the multilingual products and contents prepared by the partnerships is beyond dispute.

Languages in higher education

The development of the pilot project intensive language preparation courses (ILPC), launched in 1996 under Erasmus, is designed to allow Erasmus students to acquire the language proficiency necessary to integrate into the host country – whose language is less widely used or less widely taught – and to be able to follow the course of study chosen.

The universities of origin can, as part of support for the organisation of student mobility, can offer students appropriate language tuition prior to their departure.

In addition, the host universities can organise integrated language courses (ILC) in order to extend the learning of other languages spoken in the participant countries to a greater number of students, including in non-language subject areas.

Language development is one of the main advantages of participating in Erasmus for a great many students²⁴

Intercultural education

The incorporation of intercultural education in teaching has become a major challenge to European education systems. Its objective is to strengthen mutual understanding and solidarity between citizens, to head off racism and xenophobia, and to thus contribute to the internal cohesion of European societies. The main qualifications and skills acquired through intercultural education help to prepare citizens to come to terms smoothly with an environment characterised by an increasing level of globalisation.

The European Commission has promoted intercultural education and the inclusion in education of specific target groups such as the children of migrants, gypsies, travellers and itinerant workers for over 20 years. The policy aims of the 1977 Directive on the education of the children of migrants and the 1989 resolutions on the education of gypsies, travellers and itinerant workers have been incorporated into Action 2 of Comenius. During the period 1995-1997 over 250 projects were funded under this Action. These projects covered a wide selection of topics ranging from the introduction of teaching innovations for the teaching of the languages of the host countries or the countries of origin of the children of migrants, to the promotion of integrated approaches in schools situated in big towns which have a high percentage of immigrant children, or the training of gypsy mediators and the development of ODL tools intended for itinerant workers, to projects for active cooperation between pupils to head off racism at school.

Thanks to the Action 2 projects a start has been made on establishing close working links with the school environment, from parents to companies, to NGOs and local and regional communities. The external evaluation report points to the need to increase the visibility and dissemination of the products of these actions in order to optimise their added value which the evaluators say is beyond dispute.

Elsewhere, a number of transnational cooperation projects funded by the Adult Education action have addressed the intercultural dimension of education, either by designing teaching modules or integration pathways for persons facing the risk of exclusion because of their ethnic identity, or by introducing ways of providing information on anti-racist behaviour (anti-discrimination manuals for the workplace, teaching modules and material for discussion and raising awareness, etc.)

²⁴ POLE UNIVERSITAIRE DE LILLE *The Erasmus programme 1987-1995: Past achievements and future prospects*

What SOCRATES contributes to the development of an intercultural dimension of education is well received by most of the participants contacted by the programme evaluators. The external evaluation stresses

“SOCRATES improves the awareness and knowledge of others and ultimately interest in and tolerance of these “universes”, at the same time, proposing subjects common to the different countries, enhancing proximity between people through mobility, the creation of networks and genuine cooperation, build up the feeling of belonging to a joint project, along with the perception of Europe as a unit;”

3.3 Cooperation at all levels of teaching²⁵

Even if the actual impact of SOCRATES activities can be measured only in the medium to long term, the application of the programme at all levels of education is now reality and has in many cases opened on to the development of a European dimension in sectors hitherto removed from any structured transnational activity. In this connection, the external evaluation quotes the impact of the programme in areas such as adult education and cooperation between schools.

This cooperation between education institutions has yielded mutual enrichment thanks to the pooling of the teaching experience of the participants and the practical knowledge of the different philosophies and approaches in education. In the view of the external evaluation, the promotion of the creation of formal and informal networks in the world of education in Europe and the exchange of ideas and good practice encouraged by the programme automatically mean a major impact. It has in this regard acted as a catalyst and a multiplier and has provided European added value for the activities pursued.

The problems arising from the establishment of transnational networks have not, in the view of most of the participants, prevented the setting up of balanced networks in which the partners participate actively.

Higher education

The resolve to consolidate and intensify cooperation under the programme and to secure institutional support takes on a systematic character in the activities supported by ERASMUS Action 1: the institutional contract and the thematic networks.

The institutional contract binds a higher education establishment in its entirety to the development of a coherent European policy and to the deployment of its activities in the area of European cooperation as a function of this policy. This commitment is reflected in the “European policy declaration” which accompanies the applications submitted by the establishments. Under this system the European activities of universities are the result of a coherent strategy, an institutional commitment and a broad internal consultation at establishment level, and no longer a purely academic matter stemming from the initiative of one teacher or one department within a faculty.

Although the participants in existing inter-university cooperation projects (ICPs) were afraid of greater rigidity and red tape in the programme, the worthwhile nature of an instrument which structures the European policy of higher education establishments was not contested. Once the initial reticence had been overcome, the institutional contracts were favourably welcomed by the Education Committee and demand has never stopped growing.²⁶

²⁵ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 c) « to promote wide-ranging and intensive cooperation between institutions in the Member States at all levels of education enhancing their intellectual and teaching potential »

²⁶ For 1998/99, 1 625 contracts were approved, a figure well up on the 1 485 contracts approved during the first run (1997/98)

A study by the Association of European Universities (CRE)²⁷ shows that the system based on the institutional contract has made it possible to increase transparency, strategic reflection, the production of synergy and the raising of awareness as to the international objectives of universities

However, some criticisms remain valid, particularly regarding the slowness of administrative procedures and the obligation to plan the whole of the establishment's European policy well before the various activities take place. The Commission feels that these administrative complications will be overcome as practice oils the wheels of the system. However, the integration of a coherent European strategy in the daily management of the higher education establishments will undoubtedly make the management of activities developed under the institutional contract more flexible.

The Commission has taken on board this criticism and has already introduced the changes needed to make the procedures less cumbersome, particularly for applications for the renewal of aid. The time taken to process applications has thus fallen from 12 last year to 7 months this year.

Another point raised by university staff in their conversations with the evaluators brings up the need to guarantee the continuity of the personal commitment of teachers, who are afraid that part of their role might be taken over by the centralised system introduced by the Institutional Contract.

University cooperation projects on themes of common interests (better known under the name of "thematic network projects") are a new activity in the SOCRATES programme. The main aim of these projects is to define and develop a European dimension in specific academic subject areas or other matters of common interest thanks to cooperation between university faculties or departments and university associations (and in certain cases professional associations).

The first thematic networks began their work in 1996/97. The 34 existing thematic networks cover a wide range of areas thematic networks and group approximately 1 700 establishments in all. Despite substantial diversity in the strategies followed, all the networks constitute an excellent forum of dialogue and fit in to the perspective of general reflection on the future of higher education, the development of European cooperation and mobility, the improvement of the quality of training, and teaching innovation.²⁸

Compulsory education

One of the big innovations of SOCRATES is, as has already been stressed, to have offered for the first time to the whole of compulsory education the opportunity to take part in European cooperation activities.

Its "democratic" character also heightened by the great diversity of establishments taking part in the **European Education Projects (EEPs)** under Comenius Action 1. These are not just general education establishments, but also include many institutions which offer technical or vocational education. As a function of the structures of the education systems of the participating countries, another encouraging innovatory feature is the participation in the EEPs of many institutions catering for children with special education needs. All in all, some 7 000 schools have so far taken part in this action which is growing every year.

The schools discover different national dimensions and the European dimension of their common theme by cooperating in this multi-national framework. By investigating the points of divergence, they also come across points of convergence, which helps to build up awareness of European citizenship and to experience directly belonging to a broader community than the society of the country in which they are situated.

²⁷ A Barblan, B. M. Kehm, S. Reichert, U. Teichler «Emerging European Policy Profiles of Higher Education Institutions» a project of CRE, Kassel, 1998.

²⁸ Philippe Ruffio «Les Réseaux thématiques SOCRATES. Un outil de mobilisation collective et de réflexion prospective pour l'enseignement supérieur. Report for the European Commission. DG XXII. Brussels. June 1998».

With regard to teaching approaches, participation in an EEP under Comenius Action 1 helps to strengthen cooperation at establishment level. Indeed the aim of the EEP is to involve in a project not just a restricted group of pupils and teachers, but as many classes and levels as possible from the same school. Many participating teachers tell of the major contribution made by the EEPs in this area, it is the EEPs which prompt teachers to look how a given theme can be exploited in different subject areas. The cross-disciplinary approach thus becomes a reality in compulsory teaching.

In addition, as these institutions are at the heart of the local communities, their European activities also succeed in involving other players such as the parents, the authorities and even local companies, etc. The schools benefiting from this type of external support (moral, material, financial or other) often succeed in completing projects which are more ambitious than they had initially envisaged thanks to this synergy.

European cooperation also often provides an opportunity to introduce the new information and communication technologies quickly. These ICTs fit naturally into the running of the school, where, as well as catering for the needs of partnership, they are at the root of new enriching experiences and new skills for pupils and teachers alike.

As attested by the external evaluation, all these elements are factors which contribute to improving the quality of education. According to the external evaluation, its success stems largely from the sound integration of this action in the mainstream activities of the schools.

Cooperation in the training of teachers

The training of teachers is covered by several activities in the various chapters of the programme. Comenius Action 3 directly targets the continuing training of teachers through European continuing training projects (421 new projects funded between 1995 and 1997) or individual grants for participation in activities and European continuing training courses (approximately 2 500 grants). The aim of this action is to strengthen the European dimension of continuing training of teachers and other education staff.

The external evaluation report highlights the positive appreciation of participants with regard to this action, the resolve of these participants to follow this type of continuing training on a regular basis and the added value this action brings to their professional development.

Other actions of the programme also contribute to this effort to strengthen the European dimension and the quality of the continuing of training of teachers. The teaching of language teachers is thus a priority under Lingua. Three of its five actions involve precisely this type of activity: Lingua A (European cooperation programmes for the training of language teachers (ECP)), B (Continuing training in the area of foreign language teaching) and C (Assistantships for future language teachers)²⁹. Also significant in this context is the support for an Erasmus thematic network concerning the training of teachers.

Adult education

The Adult Education action has supported projects to improve the quality of education in this area through cooperation and through promoting better knowledge of Europe and the cultures of the various Member States.

²⁹ This latter action has knock-on effects beyond training as such in that it also represents added value for all learners and teachers within the host establishment and not only for the assistant.

In order to promote the quality of adult education, the Commission in conjunction with the education community has identified the key aspects for coherent development of adult education in Europe in terms of lifelong learning, i.e.

- promoting individual demand for education
- improving the quality of the provision of education activities
- developing support services for adult learners and trainers and promoting flexible systems for the validation of knowledge

As this action focuses on general education, the projects funded relate to specific subjects close to the reality of the European citizen from promoting access to education for disadvantaged people (migrants, unemployed persons, illiterate persons, etc.) to the creation of self-evaluation pathways for knowledge acquired, from raising awareness on anti-racist attitudes to familiarisation with new technology, etc. The main target public of the adult education projects are the players in a position to pass on the message (trainers, teachers, operators) who secure a broad cascade effect in terms of dissemination of the results of the projects.

Over the above wide range of the topics addressed, active citizenship in the broad sense of the word is the common theme in all these projects, encouraging full participation of the citizen in the social and political life of a society in the midst of change.

The "pilot" nature of these projects is seen by the external evaluation to have brought results which often go beyond the value of the final product through the knock-on effect of the partnership and cooperation process which carried the project initially. The report considers that

"this action creates interest in international cooperation in this area, and brings together the practices and experiences of several European countries. It has also introduced innovative aspects in adult education, e.g. unusual cooperation between this sector and various institutions (e.g. a museum), the incorporation of the intercultural dimension, and extensive use of new technologies."

The evaluators feel the dissemination and visibility of the products of this action should be encouraged in order to obtain the maximum benefit.

In connection with this action, it should be noted that fruitful cooperation was established with the Unesco, and SOCRATES projects played a very significant role in the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) in 1997.

3.4 Promotion of mobility and exchanges³⁰

Support for mobility, for teachers and students alike, is one of the strong points of the programme. Building on the experience gained under previous programmes, particularly ERASMUS, SOCRATES continued to support mobility as one of the means which contributes to progressing towards a European education area. Between the academic years 1995/96 and 1997/98, up to 400 000 students and 40 000 university teachers in Europe were able to have the advantage of an academic mobility experience under the ICPs first, and then under the institutional contracts.

³⁰ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 d) *to encourage the mobility of teachers so as to promote a European dimension in studies and to contribute to the qualitative improvement of their skills*

e) *to encourage mobility for students enabling them to complete part of their studies in another Member State so as to contribute to the consolidation of the European dimension in education*

f) *to encourage contacts among pupils in the European Union and to promote the European dimension in their education*

The external report goes into the details of the effects generated by mobility in this sector to state that the point is not only to encourage better mutual knowledge of the education systems of the different Member States or to let participants have the advantage of an academic experience which will count in their curriculum, but also to provide an opportunity to open up new horizons, to adjust one's own skills through contact with new cultural contexts and, equally important, to establish personal contacts at European level. This creation of networks, such as the associations of former Erasmus students or permanent contacts between teaching staff following an exchange, is a further step forward towards the European education area and generates lasting effects which go far beyond the period of study spent in another Member State.

The value of this experience has been observed and verified in all the evaluation studies conducted up to now. As the evaluation report states:

“Student and teacher mobility has become part and parcel of university life”

For many participants, what stood out from their course of study, training and even their training in citizenship was the personal experience amassed during mobility. This does not mean that the academic side is or should be neglected. By contrast, it is widely felt among the participants that the machinery for recognising and making the best use of academic achievements secured through mobility needs to be strengthened.

Mobility in compulsory education

Under Comenius Action 1, which promotes first and foremost multilateral school partnerships, cooperating around European education projects (EEPs), pupil mobility is not considered as an eligible item of expenditure.

The evaluation has nonetheless observed that as cooperation between the pupils of different countries gathered pace under the EEPs the eagerness to meet up grew. This is particularly valid for the final phase of the projects when the results can be exchanged. So it is that many exchanges took place under the EEPs but funded by external sources (parents, local authorities, etc.)

The evaluation has brought out certain real obstacles to this type of mobility. In some countries, for instance, there are legal obstacles to the mobility of minors in the school context. Other problems may be practical and relate to the lack of knowledge of foreign languages (particularly at primary school level) or of support structures (particularly in the case of a prolonged stay in another country). As for the Community level, the evaluation points out that the Comenius budget should be substantially increased if large-scale pupil mobility is to be promoted.

As regards the mobility of teachers in the area of school teaching, Comenius Action 1 makes it possible to subsidise not only teacher mobility for the purposes of meetings to organise, monitor and evaluate under the EEPs, but also exchanges of teachers, in-company placements of teachers and study visits by head teachers and senior administrative staff. During the first years of the programme, these different possibilities became more familiar and the number of applications increased continuously in all the participating countries.

Comenius Action 3 also offers opportunities: preparatory visits for European continuing training projects (action 3.1) and individual grants to take part in European continuing training activities and courses (see above).

Mobility and language teaching

The positive effects of mobility were also confirmed by the evaluation in the case of mobility related to the teaching of languages under Lingua E, already mentioned. The practical results of this action are positively acknowledged by the participants. According to the report, participation in Lingua E has had a positive impact on pupils, firstly because 98% of the participants interviewed maintained their desire to learn had been stimulated as a result.

According to 75% of those interviewed, the pupils also made progress in the understanding of the spoken language and oral expression³¹ Clearly, then, incorporating mobility into a coherent teaching context helps to improve pupil performance and thus to improve the quality of their training

Mobility under Lingua actions B and C also allows language teachers (B) and future language teachers (C) to improve their language skills in the language they teach or will teach

3 5 Encouragement for the recognition of diplomas, periods of study and other qualifications³²

If European citizens wish to exercise their right to freedom of movement and freedom of establishment in the European Union, their skills and qualifications must be recognised The SOCRATES programme has, within the limits of responsibility established by the Treaty, continued and strengthened the use of the European course credit transfer system (ECTS) This was introduced on an experimental basis under the previous ERASMUS programme and its value is today widely recognised and according to the external evaluators all the players concerned would like to see it extended Since its launch, an increasing number of higher education establishments have joined the system 145 higher education establishments introduced the ECTS system in 1989 and that figure has now risen to over 750 in 1997

This is what also prompted the Community to set up in 1984 the network of National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) Since the launch of SOCRATES this network has involved the Member States of the European Union and the EFTA-EEA countries in 18 national centres supplying authorised information and guidance on the recognition of diplomas to everyone concerned in education The work carried out to attain this objective of recognition is appreciated by the participants in the programme The external evaluation report states that 76% of the universities contacted consider that the lack of recognition of periods of study undertaken in another country is the main obstacle to mobility For the people interviewed during the external evaluation, SOCRATES plays a fundamental role by contributing to the removal of this obstacle (86% of those interviewed)

SOCRATES has like other Community programmes moved towards the recognition of non-formal and informal systems of education, in an endeavour to provide a flexible response to citizens' training requirements These systems are particularly relevant in the case of activities relating to lifelong training

3 6 Promotion of open and distance learning³³

The activities of the programme for open and distance education are directed towards a broader objective, viz the development of flexible, open methods and systems which cater for the needs of a changing society The aim is to give European citizens a response to their lifelong training requirements by adapting them to the needs of the individual and of society

³¹ Progress in reading and writing are however less marked (40%)

³² Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 g) *to encourage the academic recognition of diplomas periods of study and other qualifications with the aim of facilitating the development of an open European area for cooperation in education*

³³ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 h) *to encourage open and distance education in the context of the activities of this programme*

This area of action, which is well established in certain countries, has a fundamental role to play. It is essential to master the potential associated with new technologies in a context in which the education systems have to be more flexible and more diversified when it comes to qualifications³⁴

The contribution of SOCRATES in this connection has boosted the exchange of ideas and best practice, at the same time making it possible to throw light on matters of definition and terminology

The programme has fostered the development and application of information technology in education and endeavoured to give the European education systems a pioneering role in this area whereby genuine 'virtual mobility' can emerge alongside the physical mobility of people

It has also been successful in bringing together most of the organisations at the European level which explore the potential of ICT for education in the different education and training sectors

The external evaluation considers that the European cooperation under way since 1995 has given a boost to innovatory teaching and organisational processes. Examining the use of technology to stimulate cooperation between pupils, teachers and trainers, supporting the training of teachers, trainers or managers, developing strategies to improve the quality of multimedia products and services, developing methods to put them at the service of learning

This cooperation has also made it possible to explore matters relating to access to education and training for the 'excluded', e.g. those living in rural areas or areas remote from the centres of learning, or persons belonging to disadvantaged groups owing to social and occupational circumstances or to a handicap. A substantial part of the projects fits into this framework

156 projects were funded under the specific framework of the SOCRATES action "Promotion of open and distance education" between 1995 and 1997, bringing together over 1 000 organisations in European projects. As the external evaluation report states, it is as yet too early to gauge the real impact of these activities, although certain products are already beginning to be reproduced

3.7 Promotion of exchanges of information and experience³⁵

The European network of information on education in Europe (Eurydice) continued its work to draft and disseminate information on the national education systems. The function of the network, comprising units in each participating country coordinated by the Brussels European Unit, is to provide the authorities of the participating countries and European level with reliable comparative data on the development of systems and policies in education. The network cooperates in the pursuit of its mission with Eurostat, the CEDEFOP and other organisations

The four years which have gone by since the incorporation of the Eurydice network in SOCRATES have been a particularly productive period and well demonstrated Eurydice's capacity to adapt to the constantly increasing need for information which is not only reliable but also comparable

³⁴ *White Paper Teaching and learning towards the learning society*

³⁵ Decision 819/95/EC Article 3 *to foster exchanges of information and experience so that the diversity and specificity of the educational systems in the Member States become a source of enrichment and mutual stimulation*

These results include

- the production of several comparative studies on subjects of interest for European cooperation in education covering the 15 EU countries and the three EFTA/EEA countries concerned,
 - two new editions (1995 and 1997) of “*Key figures in education in the European Union*” in close conjunction with Eurostat, ~
 - publication of the Community database on education systems (EURYBASE), updated annually
- The development of a dedicated Internet site since the end of 1997,³⁶ and the very important work carried out to disseminate the network’s studies in an increasing number of languages shows Eurydice’s determination to press on unremittingly in its efforts to disseminate the results of its work. Its endeavours since 1995 to extend its activities not only to the EFTA/EEA countries, but also to the ten countries of central and eastern Europe and to Cyprus should also be stressed.

With regard to exchange of experience to promote reciprocal knowledge and enrichment of education systems, Arion, with its study visits of education policy leaders, has thus played a fundamental role. There were 226 visits under this action in 1995-96 involving an approximate total of 2 500 participants.

Arion visits are very appreciated in all the countries taking part in the programme and the level of satisfaction of participants is well above average. The external evaluation considers that the action should be promoted and extended in the future, stating

“The impact of this action, while hardly being measurable, is clear considering the positions held by the participants. Those answering the evaluation survey expressed their broad satisfaction”³⁷

Action III 3 1 of the programme (Analysis of questions of common interest concerning education policy) is another activity for exchange of information and experience. There is support for two types of activities: preparation of studies and analyses of subjects of common interest in the area of education policy, and implementation of operational activities on topics of common interest (exchange of experts, study visits, congresses, workshops, pilot projects). The priority subjects for the calls for proposals for this action are decided annually in close conjunction with the Committee of the Education Council. The 21 research projects launched since the start of 1996 include themes to do with the evaluation of the quality of teaching, stemming failure at school, heading off exclusion, and lifelong education.

The external evaluation report states

“The projects in progress can () be expected to have a medium-term impact at macro-education level which can thus be of benefit to the whole of a school population

The preparation and implementation augur well for this European value added. The action has two aspects: study and research by European research teams and pilot actions in the field

It is the link between scientific work and operational actions which makes this action so original and solid”

The evaluation also stresses the good quality of the dissemination policy implemented for this action and recommends that the visibility of these activities be increased.

³⁶ www.eurydice.org

³⁷ External evaluation report

4 CONCLUSIONS

This report, backed up by the results of the external valuation, shows that the SOCRATES programme has already made strides in the direction indicated by the general objectives of the programme the development of quality education and training and a European area of cooperation in education The good results obtained justify pursuing this path within a wider perspective of lifelong education and training

A number of aspects should be considered in the final phase of SOCRATES and for the new programme SOCRATES II

As already stressed, the available resources are not enough to attain the objective set in the programme in the short and medium term There is also a need to make the budgetary machinery more flexible and to focus thought on the distribution of the programme funds

The evaluation reveals broad demand for improvement of procedures so as to make them more accessible and closer to the citizen This improvement would make for greater transparency, effectiveness and simplification

The programme's information and coordination mechanisms need to be improved, and also the networking of the various organisations involved, in order to better cater for user needs and guarantee the production and dissemination of quality products Improved coordination and more flexible streamlined operation of all mechanisms must be an objective for the future

The relations which the programme maintains with all those in whose interest it is for the development of a European area of cooperation in education to prove successful should be strengthened, including associations working in the area of education and the social partners

Alongside all this, appropriate means of control, monitoring and evaluation of projects and the programme must continue to be developed so that products and the activities supported can be optimised These measures of monitoring and evaluation should subsequently open on to continuous reconsideration of the aims of the programme, their structure and mechanisms for implementation, the requirements of the target publics and the dissemination of products This reconsideration on implementation should involve all the players in the world of education

Summing up, these are the salient points to emerge

- SOCRATES has already achieved quantitatively and qualitatively remarkable results, sometimes beyond the most optimistic forecasts,
- 36 months of implementation do not provide a basis for gauging a lasting impact of the programme on systems, particularly in such a vast and heterogeneous area as education Be that as it may, the results to date show that the programme is moving ahead in the right direction,
- only the preservation of achievements under SOCRATES, combined with continuous and innovative reassessment of the challenges which the programme will have to face in the future, can secure this European dimension and this added value on a permanent basis

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