

Towards a European learning area

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INTRODUCTION

1. An efficient youth policy implies a strong co-operation between all the actors involved in the process- non-governmental organisations (NGOs), volunteers, researchers, youth workers, decision-makers and officials, namely within the European institutions and national governments. The youth policy of the European Union (EU) must be developed in interaction with the national policies of its member states for purposes of global coherence.
2. A coherent youth policy must be integrated in the framework of other public policies (social policy, employment, education, culture, health and security) and therefore asks for a horizontal approach. This horizontal approach must be reflected in a close co-ordination and division of roles (defined by the different actors in a co-operative manner) between the European institutions, the national governments and the NGOs, namely the youth organisations.
3. Furthermore, a clear division of tasks between the national and the European Union levels is essential. At European Union level youth policy should be integrated between those policies and activities in which it is possible to bring additional value to the achievements at national level. In order to achieve a better policy integration at European level there is a need to amend the Treaty of the Union to include a clear mission for the European Union in the field of youth policy.
4. The development of the education and youth programmes must be negotiated within the wider framework of a European youth policy.
5. The Communication from the European Commission "*Towards a Europe of Knowledge*" provides a set of possibilities for a new group of youth and education programmes. The decision on the new programmes is being taken at an historic time, when the future orientation of the European Union is about to be set up for the XXI century. The challenges faced by the European Union go from severe

unemployment and structural social problems to the necessary adjustment of the existing operational structures for an enlarged Union.

6. The current experiences have shown that the investment in education, training and youth is a major contributor to European co-operation and integration. What we have learned from Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Youth for Europe and the European Voluntary Service has shown that there is still room for improvement even if the general experiences have been positive.

COMMENTS TO THE PROCESS

1. The Youth Forum welcomes the Communication of the European Commission and sees it as a useful document for setting up the political framework of the future programmes though we think the paper is too vague in providing an adequate and thorough answer to the challenges of the programmes for the period 2000-2006.
2. There is a need to fully integrate the evaluation results of the present youth and education programmes. Working with programmes such as Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Youth for Europe and the European Voluntary Service has provided us with a solid ground of knowledge and experience to better understand some of the obstacles and the problems to be solved in the future as well as the good practises and actions to be maintained.
3. The process of establishing the new youth and educational programmes should not be the sole responsibility of the Education and Employment Councils of the Union. It is essential that the intervention of the Youth Ministers Council be given a priority in this process. In the designing the programmes the European Commission and the Council shall contact the different NGOs that represent the programmes' target groups and include them in the decision making process. It is of vital importance that the various Councils prioritise the discussion on these programmes in their agendas.

THE TARGET GROUPS

1. The Youth Forum supports the three principles of the Communication on the development of the programmes, namely the limited number of objectives, more focused actions and a simple administration.
2. Young people should remain the most important target group for the youth programmes. They will help to shape Europe in the next 50 years. Young people are open to changes and they are also the protagonists of education. Europe needs to become more relevant to young people and young people need institutional support for the development of their initiatives.
3. Students in further and higher education, secondary school students and vocational trainees, all referred to in this text as "students", should remain the

main target group for the new educational programmes. Even if it is the European Commission's wish to expand the scope of the programmes to a wider number of target groups as well as countries, it is still necessary to give priority to students among the possible different target groups of a future education programme.

AIMS OF THE NEW PROGRAMMES

- 1 The main aim of the new group of programmes should be to motivate, challenge and support as many young people as possible to participate in a new European learning area primarily through mobility. Furthermore, its objectives should be to foster personal growth, intercultural learning, individual independence and empowerment. The promotion of active participation, the fight against social exclusion and unemployment is also an essential feature to be taken into account by the new programmes. To facilitate European integration and address the European dimension follows from the above mentioned aim and objectives.

THE ACTIONS

1. The actions under the new programmes should maintain the successful parts of the actions under the existing programmes. The evaluation of the existing programmes must provide the basis for this information.
2. The promotion of physical mobility for young people has to remain one of the main objectives of the future programmes. The current programmes have already contributed with a number of tools to provide young people with more mobility chances, such as funding and systems for the accreditation of qualifications.
3. Virtual mobility, mentioned also by the Commission in its Communication, is an already existing dimension of many of our activities. Virtual mobility should be an integrated part of the actions undertaken within the programmes, but not a separate objective in itself. Nevertheless the access of all young people to the new "information highways" must be promoted, encouraged and given resources at all levels.
4. The Youth Forum finds the aim of the Commission's Communication to start horizontal activities and create a basis for the establishment of the European educational area useful and necessary. Education should be seen primarily as an instrument to human development therefore calling for an integrated approach. Co-operation between vocational training, formal and non-formal education is essential when establishing any policies with impact on the learning process.
5. When it defines the European learning policies and educational area the Commission's Communication does not recognise adequately, or indeed at all, the

role of youth organisations and youth activities in providing non-formal education opportunities to young people. These activities contribute greatly to the personal growth and learning of young people and should be more recognised. The Communication has a limited approach to education in so far it only recognises learning as being the acquisition of qualifications, giving little relevance to the number of competencies and skills that young people obtain outside formal education.

6. Youth organisations and all those involved in youth work have to strive for a greater recognition of the learning possibilities that they offer to young people, though they also need to be supported by the governmental institutions in this effort.
7. The learning opportunities and processes provided by the non-formal sector do promote a set of important skills and competencies sought by the global employment markets, through the building of young peoples' personalities, such as the ability to think critically, organise and utilise information, manage conflicts and negotiate, work in intercultural environments and lead and participate in projects.
8. The future youth and educational programmes must allow for:
 - a) the funding of pilot projects in the frame of creativity and innovation;
 - b) the provision of language learning facilities;
 - c) the support of other complimentary actions in relation to the core actions;
 - d) the funding of preparation and support events in relation to the core actions;
9. For the new educational programme the following should be the key actions:
 - a) individual and group student exchanges at all levels of education and vocational training;
 - b) teacher mobility at all levels of education and vocational training;
 - c) language and cultural preparation in student, trainees and teacher mobility activities;
 - d) further co-operation between educational institutions for improved accreditation of qualifications, further development and implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and accreditation systems in secondary education;
 - e) practical stages abroad whenever justified by the curricula in both higher education and vocational training;
 - f) promotion of thematic networks at regional and European level;
 - g) the promotion of curricula design possibilities;
10. For the new youth programme the following should be the key actions:

- a) individual and group youth exchanges both within and outside Europe;
- b) individual voluntary service exchanges both long and short term;
- c) training activities aimed at preparing future exchanges;
- d) language and intercultural learning orientation activities for the preparation of exchanges;
- e) innovative projects targeted at new countries and groups of young people;
- f) youth research initiatives;

Though acknowledging the value of individual learning we believe that some of the most important processes of learning take place within a group. Supporting peer education should remain one of the characteristics of the new programmes.

ACHIEVING THE AIMS

1. The Youth Forum believes that the key challenge is to create a group of programmes that are:
 - a) Capable of utilising the best practises and results of each of the programmes, avoiding the loss of resources;
 - b) Capable of being as user-friendly as possible, to attract the participation of young people from all parts of society and to ensure the involvement of disadvantaged young people. In order to accomplish this the European Commission should improve the quality and quantity of the information concerning the programmes;
2. The new programmes should aim at greater decentralisation and also at using the existing support structures for information, monitoring and evaluation. The decentralised model facilitates access and provides a clear and understandable "single counter model" to the young people applying, as well as to those promoting the programmes at national level. The principle of accessibility is one the Youth Forum wishes to see applied more often also at centralised level.
3. The Youth Forum finds that it is appropriate to mention that as far as resources are concerned the current funding is not enough for the programmes to respond to the challenge of the increasing number of students and young people wishing to join the initiatives of the European Union. Improving this situation implies increased funding for the future programmes of the European Union on youth and education. New combined funding should be sought from other programmes and budget lines such as those funding the foreign policy of the Union namely Phare, Tacis and Meda.
4. The aims for the new programmes, as well as the expected operational results have to be realistic and well balanced between the various interests at stake. Setting aims for the programmes also implies finding the right answers for the allocation of resources.

5. If we are to further develop the European nature of the future programmes this should be promoted within a global framework of intercultural learning and in relation to other regions of the world.
6. The need to establish on-going evaluation mechanisms for the new programmes right from the start, and the importance of opening this process to those participating in the programmes is an idea that needs to be implemented.

FINAL REMARKS

1. Non-governmental organisations should be recognised as social partners in the running of the programmes at national and European levels. Utilising NGOs' competencies in such a work does not only make the European learning area more efficient, it also makes the new programmes more open to their users. It is important to underline the many contributions that European youth organisations have brought to young people's European experience and the relevance of continuing to support their activities at centralised level.
2. The new programmes should provide INGYOs¹ and NYCs², as well as local youth groups, with the possibility of using the necessary resources to network and be trained on the new programmes, in order to increase the efficiency of the latter. Youth, student and school student organisations should be included in all levels of decision making, promoting, facilitating and evaluating the new programmes. This would allow for a continuous reflection on the needs of their target groups and for the further development of the programmes.
3. The Youth Forum is awaiting with positive expectation the European Commission's concrete proposal for the new programmes and will then contribute with its more detailed reflection and reaction to it.

¹ International non-governmental youth organisations

² National Youth Councils