

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening cooperation with third countries in the field of higher education

1. Introduction

1. Article 149 EC (Education) makes clear that Member States retain primary responsibility for education policy within the Community. Action at Community level is justified where it can provide 'value-added': where, by acting together, the Member States can achieve more than if they were to act alone. The European Community supports education in its Member States in a number of ways. Since 1987 it has developed programmes to stimulate educational co-operation and mobility within the Community, and these activities have recently been extended to cover the associated countries as well [1]. They involve mainly student [2] and trainee exchanges, teacher and trainer exchanges, exchanges of experience (usually through networks) between projects and partners, and the joint development of innovative activities. Networks and partnerships between institutions - schools, training, centres and universities - have been a backbone of these activities since their inception. Expenditure on such activities currently runs at about EUR500m per annum.

[1] In particular, the Socrates and Leonardo programmes, OJ Nos. L146 of 11.6.99 and L28 of 3.2.2000

[2] Hereafter 'students' covers all those persons following learning or training courses or programmes which are run by higher education or vocational education and training institutions

2. Article 149 EC stipulates, in its third paragraph, that "The Community and the Member States shall foster co-operation with third countries...". Some Member States have a well-established tradition of, mainly bilateral, co-operation with third countries on education. For its part, the Community, in the field of higher education, has established a number of initiatives with third countries drawing on experience gained from ERASMUS and similar programmes. Examples of these are the two agreements with the US and with Canada, just renewed for a further five years; the TEMPUS programme, originally launched in 1990 as part of the original Phare activity, but now (since the EC's main education activities are open to associated countries) embracing Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Western Balkans; and ALFA, a programme that seeks to develop higher education in Latin America through links with EC institutions.

2. First steps in responding to new challenges

3. In developing its higher education systems the Community must seek to prepare its citizens and its workforce for a global environment by including the international dimension in an appropriate way. This point is clearly made in the recent report of the Education Council to the Stockholm European Council on the objectives of education systems [3].

[3] Cf. Sub-heading 2.3, Council document No. 5980/01

4. Several Member States (eg the UK, France, Germany or the Netherlands) have taken measures to respond to the same need. For example, the British Council, the United Kingdom's international organisation for educational and cultural relations, uses its considerable resources at home and abroad (243 offices in 110 countries) to develop the international dimension of British education and culture and to build the UK's role as a leading provider of educational and cultural opportunity for people overseas. In 1998, France created Edufrance, an Agency whose main aims are to promote world-wide France's potential as a destination for foreign students and researchers, provide international students with global hosting services and co-ordinate the French "educational offer". The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), an institution with a long tradition in the advancement of international education in Germany, has in recent times intensified its efforts to promote education in Germany by positioning itself as a service provider and endorsing the label "Qualified in Germany".

5. Community programmes in education, and particularly ERASMUS, have had a substantial impact in boosting the capacity for international co-operation among European universities. In addition to changes in the design of education programmes and new possibilities offered for study in other Member States, many universities have set up or reinforced their offices for international relations. To a large extent this is a response to the increased volume of international activities that has resulted from their involvement in Community programmes. A further effort is required at EC level, to encourage institutions systematically to integrate new co-operation with third countries into a wider partnership framework.

6. This effort is also needed because there is an ever-increasing demand for international education and student mobility. The number of international exchange students has never been greater; but they flock mainly to the US (over 500,000 international students in 1999/2000). Over 3/4 of the approximately 400,000 students from non-European countries studying in the EC go to the UK, France and Germany [4].

[4] Source: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1998, chapter 3.14: « Education at the third level: foreign students by country of origin, in the 50 major host countries ».

7. While there may be healthy competition between Member States countries to attract international students, the role of the EC should be primarily to encourage co-operative approaches so that the benefits can be shared more widely within the EC and partner countries. In doing so, the EC must acknowledge that Europe's status as a centre of excellence in learning is not always appreciated or

understood by third country universities, or by students looking for an international education.

8. It is the quality of European higher education institutions, measured (among other ways) through the volume and scope of institutions' scientific - in the widest sense of the word - and technological research activities, which is crucial. Co-operation in higher education and training therefore goes hand-in-hand with co-operation in science and technology, which mobilises scientific resources in universities in the Community as well as in third countries. Increasing the attractiveness of our universities requires an assurance of quality that is widely understood in the world. The absence of such an assurance means that Europe will not perform as well as the other leading providers of education services. From another angle, Europe's political and commercial success in the world is dependent on future decision-makers in third countries having a better understanding of, and closer ties with, Europe.

9. Many third countries see potential benefits in systematic co-operation with European higher education institutions, especially within multilateral networks involving institutions from more than one Member State. Such co-operation enhances the value of bilateral education arrangements with individual Member States. This is the reason why in almost all agreements between the EC and third countries, education is mentioned as a field for potential co-operation. In practice the follow-up to these commitments is contingent on availability of resources.

10. The following conclusions can be drawn:

- * The Community should ensure that its education activities include the international dimension in a more systematic way;

- * The Community should give greater visibility to its action in this field in order to promote Europe as a centre of excellence, and to attract students seeking an international education.

11. This Communication proposes some immediate actions that can be taken to respond to these challenges in the short term. In the medium term, the Commission will develop an overall strategy building on the debate flowing from the present Communication, on experience gained, and on a fuller analysis of the issues at stake [5].

[5] A study has already been completed in this respect, which provides some of the background to this Communication. See "The Globalisation of Education and Training : Recommendations for a Coherent Response of the European Union; Dr Sybille Reichter, Bernd Wächter, 2000. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/infos.html>

3. Objectives

12. Two immediate objectives can be identified that the EC should pursue in its co-operation with third countries in this field:

(1) develop high quality human resources in partner countries and within the EC, through reciprocal human resource development,

(2) promote the EC as a world-wide centre of excellence for study / training as well as for scientific and technological research.

13. The extent to which these objectives can be realised will guide the European Community in its choice of co-operation activities as well as the partnerships it may, where appropriate, envisage establishing with third countries. In pursuing these objectives, the Community will encourage co-operation with third-country institutions that have achieved a level of development comparable to that of EC institutions. The Community will also be responsive to requests from third countries to establish co-operative activities.

14. In the area of development co-operation, the inclusion of higher education in co-operation efforts may, if appropriately designed, contribute to the eradication of poverty in the world, which is the overarching objective of EC development policy. Given the particular nature of this challenge, and the level of resources devoted to it, this will be the subject of a separate Communication that the Commission will prepare for the end of 2001.

4. Measures to be taken

15. The following measures will be taken to initiate progress towards achieving the objectives set out in paragraph 12. The Community will:

- * use, wherever possible, the experience gained in the intra-Community programmes in its relations with third countries. ERASMUS, in particular, has attracted interest and requests to participate from around the world. We should build on this.

- * provide for diversity in the arrangements with each country and where appropriate, with each region. Actions arising from this Communication will focus on higher education co-operation, while ensuring that these actions are compatible with countries' National Education policies and EC development co-operation strategy.

16. Co-operation will focus on multilateral networks and partnerships involving countries that have achieved a level of development in higher education comparable to that of European institutions. Working within an agreed framework between universities such as those set up under the EC/US and EC/Canada programmes or, in a different context, Tempus or ALFA, requires the partner institutions to agree on the academic content of courses to be taught to exchange students. Institutions also have to agree in particular on the arrangements for recognition of the work done by the home and host universities, and arrangements for care of the student while he or she is abroad.

17. The possibility of increasing the numbers of student exchanges within these frameworks and other co-operation schemes will be examined. However, we should avoid exchanges which are not linked to a partnership between higher education institutions as far as possible because they limit the benefit to the institutions concerned. Exchanges that take place within a university partnership are more likely to enable other students and teachers to share in the experience and to benefit from it - albeit to a lesser extent. The advent of virtual mobility, thanks to the development of e- and open and distance learning and the generalised use of information and communication technologies, also increases the importance of (and facilitates the creation of) structured, mutually beneficial, partnerships between universities.

18. Student exchanges, however, are not by themselves enough. The full benefit of co-operation can only be obtained where student exchanges are accompanied by staff exchanges, by virtual mobility, by joint programme development, by proper recognition arrangements, etc. These provide the full academic framework within which the investment of time, skill and resources is most fruitful.

19. In increasing the number of exchanges, we must remain conscious of the serious issue of 'brain drain'. Short term mobility of the sort proposed by inter-university agreements under TEMPUS or ALFA (in general not more than one academic year) implies a return to the country of origin and is thus less likely to cause a brain drain.

20. However, the number of free moving students seeking an international education today is greater than ever we should also consider the desirability of increasing the numbers of longer-term grants for students from third countries seeking a full period of study in the EC. This may be justified, for example, where courses are lacking in the country concerned, including in some cases advanced courses; or where students would have gone abroad anyway and EC universities offer the most relevant courses. Every country needs some international expertise amongst its best educated people.

21. The Commission will encourage the use of accreditation systems compatible with well established European approaches, in particular the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is now the European standard in higher education. This system makes the recognition of academic work done abroad much easier in the country of origin. Interest in it from other parts of the world (e.g. in Latin America and within the UMAP Pacific programme) is already substantial. Further development of this system would be in line with the "Bologna process" and with the conclusions of the recent meeting of high education Ministers from over 30 European countries in Prague, on 18 and 19 May 2001. Mobility, accreditation and quality assurance were identified by Ministers at those meetings as matters of particular importance.

22. In co-operation with the Member States, a joint promotional operation for the EC as a centre of excellence in learning around the world, concentrating at first on countries with a high proportion of potential exchange students, should be launched as a first step towards reaching the second objective set out in paragraph 12.

23. In support of this, it is important to strengthen European studies capacities in third countries. For example, the Commission will extend the network of European Union Studies Centres and Jean Monnet Chairs around the world, so as to provide a full service to interested academics and to demonstrate the activity of the EC in this field within universities. European institutions should be encouraged to develop truly European educational 'packages' by, for example, developing joint courses which allow foreign, as well as European, students to spend more than one academic year in different Member States. This could lead, where appropriate, to joint diplomas.

24. Support will therefore be offered in order to help European universities' collaborative efforts, inter alia, to develop joint European courses, to help with

promotion, and to deal with issues such as accreditation and the promotion of the ECTS.

5. A Pilot Programme for Latin America

25. Building on the achievements of ALFA, the Commission will quickly establish a pilot, postgraduate, scholarship programme targeting the most suitable professionals and postgraduate students from Latin American countries. The aims of this travel and study scholarship scheme will be:

- * to help recently graduated and high level professionals to benefit from excellence in European academia;
- * to allow future decision-makers in Latin America to develop closer ties with Europe and have a better understanding of its cultural diversity;
- * to foster the creation of further links between the two regions.

26. In order to implement this programme and encourage visibility, transparency and efficiency, the Commission will associate the institutionalised networks already established to stimulate co-operation and foster mobility among professionals and postgraduate students in the EC and Latin America. All higher education and training institutions in the EC and Latin America will be eligible to take part in the pilot programme, provided that they are officially recognised by the governments of their respective countries and are part of one of these networks. This will at once encourage participation and enhance transparency. The Commission will undertake an information campaign aimed at the networks, students and public via the media, in order to ensure a suitable profile for this pilot programme.

6. Means

27. These objectives should be achieved, wherever possible, through existing programmes and legal bases. The aim is to fund the proposed actions through existing agreements and protocols where these exist, in accordance with the normal planning procedures and implementation modalities. Resources will be allocated to the extent necessary, within the existing budgetary envelopes and legal bases and within the framework provided by the financial perspectives. This attribution of funds will be detailed in the respective country strategies and multi-annual programming where appropriate. Where new bilateral schemes, modelled on the existing co-operation schemes with the United States and Canada, appear feasible and desirable, specific legal bases will be proposed according to the usual procedures.

28. In addition, in order to encourage mobility of third country students within the EC, we shall continue our efforts to establish harmonised conditions of entry and residence for study purposes.

7. Conclusion

29. These first steps will be accompanied by a process of evaluation of results achieved and fuller analysis of the challenges Europe faces as a result of global developments in the field of higher education. The Commission hopes that the present Communication will help stimulate debate on the issues involved. The

Commission will aim to draw the appropriate conclusions from this process with a view to possible further policy proposals. This is likely to come forward in 2003.

30. This Communication is submitted to the European Parliament and the Council for consideration.