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**COMMISSION INFORMATION NOTE
ON THE ASSESSMENT OF THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION
OTHER THAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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1 Context

Education in the Member States has made great strides forward over the past 30 years and this has enabled schooling to be extended and its content enhanced. It is often the case that education systems have developed in order to provide a better response to the challenges thrown up first by a period of sustained growth and then by recession.

The Member States plough considerable financial resources into their education systems, an investment which, while figures vary according to the Member States concerned, has made it possible to substantially raise the general level of education.

The attention countries devote to their education systems is increasingly underpinned by a quest for quality, the improvement of which has become a common goal for all the countries and all education establishments in the European Union (EU). Arrangements and steps to guarantee quality therefore feature ever more prominently in the education policies of the Member States.

Since the Spanish Presidency in 1989 education ministers have on several occasions reiterated this concern for quality, stressing their eagerness to achieve a more thorough reciprocal knowledge on this at European level and asking the Commission to address this crucial issue.

Following the entry into force of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), quality in teaching has been a focal point of EU activity in the field of education. Indeed, Article 126 of the EC Treaty states that the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between the Member States.

2 Assessment as a contributory factor to quality

Quality is a multifaceted concept. The quality of a product, of a system or an arrangement cannot be defined in absolute terms, but rather as a function of objectives set and the means whereby they are to be attained.

It is widely acknowledged that assessment is one of the linchpins in the improvement of quality in education and as such it has a common role throughout the Member States. Naturally the methods for assessing quality and effectiveness of education systems differ across the countries concerned, but the principle remains the same, i.e. how to judge as accurately as possible the results of education systems in relation to the objectives set and the resources made available.

3 European Community activities in evaluating quality

3.1 Pilot projects in higher education

The pilot projects conducted in 1995 in higher education has proved extremely useful and promising. Everyone involved benefited from them irrespective of the diversity of situations and national policies on assessment. Both countries having institutionalised and formal systems and those still in the early stages of experience with assessment, benefitted from European cooperation instigated by the Commission.

The experience gained with higher education provides pointers on how to design and structure cooperation in the area of education other than higher education. It is nevertheless clear that due account will have to be taken in this area of the specific circumstances which apply to non-higher education. So there can be no question of simply transposing the cooperation model used for the pilot projects in higher education.

3.2 Preparatory activities in non-higher education in 1995

A range of preparatory work was carried out in 1995 for the purposes of assessing the quality of non-higher education. This work could lead on to better-structured and more systematic cooperation in the future.

Meetings of senior officials

Senior education officials met twice in 1995 to discuss quality in non-higher education. Both meetings were very fruitful and produced a comprehensive and useful exchange of information for all parties involved.

The two meetings addressed the theme of assessment from a different perspective, stressing the diversity and wealth of approaches adopted in the Member States. Whereas the meeting under the French Presidency (June 1995) had focused on the assessment of pupil achievement, the meeting under the Spanish Presidency (30 November-1 December 1995) was given over to the external assessment and self-assessment of schools.

Action 3.1 of Chapter III of the SOCRATES programme

Action 3.1 of Chapter III of SOCRATES asks the Commission to organise an exchange of information and experience on issues of common interest, with priority going to quality in teaching.

In 1995 the Commission accordingly took the first steps to strengthen the exchange of information and experience across the Member States as regards assessment of quality in non-higher education.

In particular, in order to lay the foundations for more ambitious activities from 1997 on, it commissioned in 1995 for two studies to take stock of assessment arrangements in the Member States. These two studies, the findings of which will shortly be available, cover all the countries taking part in the SOCRATES programme. They tackle the theme of assessing quality in non-higher education from different perspectives, the first focusing on the steering of education systems, the second on the assessment of pupil achievement.

Under Action 3.1 of Chapter III, the thematic priority of assessment of quality in non-higher education is carried over for 1996. In addition to studies and analyses, the Commission may provide financial aid for conferences and workshops and the organisation of exchanges of experts and study visits.

Targeted Socio-Economic Research Programme

This specific programme, which is integrated in the Fourth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, also treats as a thematic priority the questions of assessment of quality of education and of the effectiveness of education systems.

In 1995, the Commission has financed a research project on the assessment of quality of education as well as a cooperation network between research institutions working in this area. The first results of these activities are expected to be available by autumn 1996.

Results of preparatory work

This preparatory work, undertaken at EU level in January 1995, brought out a number of common points which make a significant contribution as regards the assessment of quality in non-higher education. The results achieved by this work could provide invaluable pointers as to how future cooperation at European level could be structured.

Assessing the quality of non-higher education can involve a variety of target publics and pursue aims which are different but complementary:

- The results of the assessment could help to broaden policy decision-makers' knowledge base on which they draw in order to steer education systems. Assessment is thus an aid to policy decision.
- Assessment can involve players directly concerned in the field such as inspectors, teachers and pupils, by giving them valuable indications as to how to improve their daily practices. Assessment can thus also be considered as one of the levers of change and continuing improvement.
- The results of the assessment can also be of interest to the players outside the school systems and who are more directly concerned with the job market and initial vocational training, e.g. training establishments and the business sector. The link between the education systems and the social players can thus be strengthened.
- Assessment can help to increase transparency in education systems by showing citizens how money invested in education is used.

As shown at these two meetings of senior education officials held in 1995, the assessment of quality in non-higher education can be based on a wide variety of methods and approaches. Despite the diversity which exists, the assessment systems in many Member States hinge on three basic elements: self-assessment of schools, external assessment and the drafting of a report:

- Self-assessment can be carried out by a wide variety of methods. It should take into account all the teaching aspects, the climate at the school, the organisation and the management of resources.
- Self-assessment can be rounded off by outside assessments, guidance and support. This external assessment may consist of a check to confirm or correct the appreciation of players involved in the self-assessment. Outside assessment should above all be designed to optimise processes and results.
- In addition to self-assessment and external assessment, the third element in the assessment system is to provide regular reports on the running of the education system and its various component parts. These regular reports should target different groups (school councils, ministries, the general public). It is essential for assessment results to be used systematically to design and implement steps to establish an ongoing process of improvement.

4 The added value of Community level action

The preparatory work carried out in 1995 showed that the objectives of a Community-level action on quality of non-higher education could be:

- to make policy decision-makers at all levels and the field players (inspectors, headmasters, teachers, pupils) aware of the need for and the advantages of assessment. This would help to create a culture of assessment;
- to encourage an exchange of information, experience and good practice in order to instigate innovation and bring a European dimension to the different assessment practices used in the Member States. These exchanges should allow every Member State to improve its arrangements and methods by enriching them on the basis of the experience of the other countries.

The point of establishing European level cooperation on quality assessment is obviously not to produce an assessment model which can be generally introduced. On the contrary, it is precisely the diversity and wealth of methods and approaches used nationally which will generate a fruitful exchange of information which can contribute to improving and enriching existing assessment arrangements. Any action at European level must therefore be based on the different national contexts and the historical, social, cultural and political situation in each country.

By pursuing these objectives the Community can bring genuine added value to steps taken by the Member States. In so doing it fully performs its specific role as defined in Article 126 of the Treaty, i.e. creating the right circumstances for decision makers and the players concerned to take on board the most innovatory and relevant experiences in other Member States and build up an area of operational cooperation.

5 Outlook for future cooperation at European level

The assessment of quality in non-higher education is a very topical theme in all the countries of the European Community. Pilot projects conducted in higher education have shown great potential for European level cooperation, which is why the Commission feels that discussing the quality of non-higher education at ministerial level could be a very profitable and fruitful experience for all concerned.

The preparatory work will be continued and stepped up in 1996, particularly under Action 3.1 of Chapter III of the SOCRATES programme. The Commission's work will in particular include the preparation of studies and analyses, the organisation of conferences and workshops and the organisation of exchanges of experts and study visits. This preparatory work will pave the way for the Commission to embark at the start of 1997 on comparatively ambitious pilot actions.