

ROADMAP

Title of the initiative: **Commission proposal for benchmarks on languages**
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Initial IA screening & planning of further work

A. Context and problem definition

(i) *What is the political context of the initiative? (ii) How does this initiative relate to past and possible future initiatives, and to other EU policies?*

(i) The political decision to develop a linguistic indicator was taken in March 2002 at the Barcelona European Summit. Heads of State and Government, having set the objective of making European Union education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010, called "*for further action ... to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age...*" At the same time, they called for the "*establishment of a linguistic competence indicator in 2003.*" This decision arose from the need of having a more complete picture of the language competences in Europe which would allow to measure progress towards the objective of teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age.

On the basis of the detailed discussions carried out within the Commission Expert Working Groups on Languages and on Indicators and Benchmarks, the Commission adopted the Communication *The European Indicator of Language Competence* (August 2005) which described the need for a tool for European governments to develop language learning policies and improve national standards. On this basis, one year later, the Council concluded on a number of key issues concerning the European Indicator of Language Competence and asked for the establishment of an experts group with the mandate to advise the Commission on the technical aspects of the indicator. The European Indicator of Language Competence Advisory Board was set up in October 2006. The work of the Board has formed an important input to the writing of the Commission's Communication "*Framework for the European survey on language competences*" (April 2007) reporting back to the Council on the progress of work.

Following the Council Conclusions on a *coherent framework on indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training* (May 2007), in 2008 the European Commission launched a European Survey on Language Competences in order to collect accurate and up-to-date data on the outcomes of foreign language teaching systems. The results will be available in February 2012.

The Council Conclusions of May 2009 on a "*Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training*" ("*Education and Training ET 2020*") gave the Commission a mandate to develop proposals of a new benchmark, among others, in the area of languages skills, to monitor progress toward the set up objective of teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age. A benchmark on languages, one of the five "European benchmarks", will constitute a mean of monitoring progress and will contribute to evidence-based policy supported by the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

(ii) The further development of foreign language skills is important to encourage mobility within the Union (link with the policy on mobility); it will contribute to the creation of a truly European labour market by allowing citizens to take full advantage of the freedom to work or study in another Member State (link with the employment policy). Furthermore, a labour force with practical language and intercultural skills enables European enterprise to compete effectively in the global market-place (competitiveness).

What are the main problems identified?

The main problems identified are the following:

1) Insufficient knowledge of foreign languages among EU citizens.

The currently available data suggests that language skills are unevenly spread across countries. According to the Eurobarometer's survey results the percentage of citizens saying that they can take part in a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue range from 97% in Luxembourg to only 27% in the UK (2002). The Eurydice data on teaching languages at schools in Europe shows that at present in lower secondary education two foreign languages are learnt in by 50% of the EU pupils.

These two data sources show how far we are from achieving the objective of mastering two foreign languages. This insufficient mastering of foreign languages among EU citizens constitutes an obstacle to the development of a more dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy and to labour force mobility. Studies on links between languages and business demonstrated how language competences contribute to the increase in the number of jobs available and to ensure that European companies are able to compete on the global market.

In addition, language learning promotes mutual understanding and greater tolerance of other cultures, and has relevance for two of the other objectives: developing skills for the knowledge society and supporting active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion.

The insufficient language competences of Europeans originate from different approaches among the educational systems of the Member States as to their language teaching policies and overall quality of teaching. It also reflects different foreign languages and different experiences and practise of foreign languages in different countries (ex. projection of film in the original version with subtitles, or dubbed into the language of the country in question).

2) Incomplete knowledge-base on the state of language competences in the EU.

The currently available data are limited to input data (e.g. information about language teaching in schools) and to public opinion survey results. These input data, though valuable, do not give a complete picture of the state of language competences in the EU. Without objective data, decision-making to improve the currently insufficient knowledge of foreign languages among EU citizens is hampered.

3) Ineffectiveness to measure progress towards the objective: learning two foreign languages from a very early age.

In the established framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training, based on common objectives and aimed primarily at supporting the improvement of national education and training systems through the development of complementary EU-level tools, mutual learning and the exchange of good practice via the open method of coordination, the periodic monitoring of progress towards a set objective provides an essential contribution towards evidence-based policy making. The strategic objectives set up for the period 2010-2020 for education and training need accordingly to be accompanied by indicators and by reference levels for performance ("European benchmarks"). These help to measure at European level the overall progress made and to show what has been achieved. Currently, in the field of language learning and teaching we cannot measure progress because a language indicator does not yet exist.

Who is affected?

All citizens are potentially affected as better competences in foreign languages encourage a more open approach to others, their cultures and outlooks and allow taking full advantage of living in the multicultural and multilingual European society. In addition better competences in foreign languages could help citizens to be more employable and adaptable in the modern EU labor market.

In particular, the following groups are affected by the lack of reliable data on the outcomes of foreign language teaching and learning:

1. Policy makers in the Member States who cannot take appropriate measures to improve the language teaching system in their country and thus to progress towards the goal of the mother tongue + two foreign languages for all EU pupils;
2. EU policy makers who cannot propose appropriate policy lines and EU level actions in the field of language teaching and learning;
3. Researchers in field of language learning and teaching who cannot exchange their experiences and participate in common research projects.
4. Teachers, because the lack of the data on good practices in language learning makes the introduction of new methods of teaching more difficult;
4. Students as poor language competences make it more difficult to study, to work abroad and to develop contacts in others countries.

(i) Is EU action justified on grounds of subsidiarity? (ii) Why can the objectives of the proposed action not be achieved sufficiently by Member States (necessity test)? (iii) As a result of this, can objectives be better achieved by action by the Community (test of EU Value Added)?

(i) Yes, according to the Article 165 of the Lisbon Treaty; paragraph 1 and 2:

1. The Union shall 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...

2. Union action shall be aimed at:

— developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States...

(ii) The objectives of the proposed action cannot be achieved sufficiently by Member States. European benchmarks are based on international comparative data. Such data can only be collected within the frame of International or European wide surveys. National initiatives in the field are important but do not permit international comparisons as needed to support the OMC. An example of such data in a comparable educational field is the PISA survey on reading literacy which is now widely accepted as a valuable tool by national policy makers. The Open Method of Coordination requires exchanges and identification of good practices on the European level based on valid comparable data.

(iii) Yes. A benchmark on languages, as mentioned earlier, is part of the coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks which - within the open method of coordination – are foreseen to support the realisation of the Education and Training 2020 strategy. The exchanges and mutual learning within the open method of coordination would provide the EU value added to the efforts of national policy makers. The OMC is the appropriate working method for the exchange of best policy practice in these areas.

B. Objectives of EU initiative

What are the main policy objectives?

The overall policy objective is to improve the language competences of the EU citizens by extending and improving the quality of the teaching of two foreign languages to all EU pupils.

Specific objectives are:

- 1) To provide countries participating in the European Survey on Language Competences with comparable data on foreign language competence and with a basis for exchanging knowledge about good practice in language learning.
- 2) To set up an instrument, a benchmark on languages, to measure progress towards the objective to be reached of mother tongue + two foreign languages and to complete the coherent framework

of indicators and benchmarks measuring progress in education and training within the open method of coordination.

Do the objectives imply developing EU policy in new areas or in areas of strategic importance?

No.

C. Options

(i) What are the policy options? (ii) What legislative or 'soft law' instruments could be considered? (iii) Would any legislative initiatives go beyond routine up-date of existing legislation?

(i) Policy options:

1. A Commission communication to the Council by the end of 2012. This communication will be based on the results of the first European Survey on Language Competences (currently ongoing). It will propose a benchmark on languages and the launch of a second round of the survey to be carried out in 2015-2016. Only regular cycles of the language survey could guarantee the validity of the benchmark by providing objective updated data on language competences. A Benchmark on languages developed in this way will be part of the existing framework of indicators and benchmarks within the OMC for education and training.

2. A Commission communication to the Council by the end of 2012 to propose a European benchmark by 2012, but complemented by national targets in the field. On the basis of the survey results a European benchmark on languages would be proposed and Member States would be invited to set national targets linked to it. Regular cycles of the survey would need to be conducted in the future as under option 1.

3. No further action on the part of the EU: continue working towards the objective set up by the European Council in Barcelona: to teach at least two foreign languages from a very early age only by separate efforts of Member States. The European Survey would not be repeated. National policies would be developed outside the existing open method of coordination

Does the action proposed in the options cut across several policy areas or impact on action taken/planned by other Commission departments?

No.

*Explain how the options respect the proportionality principle.
Has to be answered for each of the options listed above.*

All suggested policy options are fully in accordance with the article 165 of the Treaty. The proposed policy options do not go further than what is necessary to achieve the objectives, in keeping with the principle of proportionality. Indeed, the Treaty gives the Community the mandate to encourage cooperation between Member States in the field of education and training and, if necessary, to support and supplement their action, including through incentive measures.

D. Initial assessment of impacts

What are the significant impacts likely to result from each policy option (cf. list of impacts in the Impact Assessment Guidelines pages 32-37), even if these impacts would materialise only after subsequent Commission initiatives?

The impact of the option 1: A European benchmark on languages can be expected to provide a strong incentive for national governments to improve language competences and language teaching. Experiences with European benchmark in fields like adult learning participation or on the number of graduates in Math, Science and Technology during the Lisbon process have proven that positive effects can be expected. A European benchmark on languages can therefore be expected to be a significant step forward in achieving the objective of mastering at least two foreign languages.

The European survey on language competences will produce valid comparable and up-date data in the field. Measuring progress of languages competences will be made possible through subsequent rounds of the European Survey as stipulated in the *Council Conclusions on a coherent framework on indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training* (May 2007).

For the Commission, this option will have limited administrative costs related to the call for the tender procedure for future rounds of the survey and the management of the contract. The Commission will also have the task of negotiating the EU benchmark and of leading the ongoing reflection on how to improve policies for better language learning. This work will be undertaken in the broader context of OMC exchanges on education and training with Member States and it will not give rise to substantial new administrative costs for the Member States.

The impact of the option 2: The impact is identical to that of Option 1 but complementing the EU benchmark with national targets would increase national ownership of the EU benchmark and therefore reinforce the positive effects on the improvement of language competences in Member States.

In addition to the same impact on the Commission in terms of costs as under the option 1, the Commission will have to negotiate the national targets with Member States. This option will be realised within the existing framework so the costs for the Member States will be not substantial.

The impact of the option 3: a continuation of foreign language teaching in line with the EU policy in the field since the Lisbon strategy, outside the OMC. There would not be a benefit from the added value of a European benchmark or national targets.

There will be no costs or administrative burdens either on the Commission, or on the Member States.

Could the options have impacts on the EU-Budget (above 5 Mio €) and/or should the IA also serve as the ex-ante evaluation, required by the Financial Regulation?

Please answer this question for each of the options

Option 1: The European Survey on Language Competences was launched following up the request from the Council to propose indicators on languages. The adoption of the benchmark could imply the need of regular surveys satisfying the Council demand (May 2009) to develop indicator covering all EU official languages in four competences. The ongoing first round of the survey costs 5.783.500. million, covered by the Life-long Learning Programme (LLP), and covers the five most widely taught EU languages (DE, ES, ENG, FR, IT) in only three competences (reading, listening, writing).

The second round of the survey would need, according to the Conclusions of Council, to include the development of survey instruments for all taught foreign languages in the EU and instruments covering also speaking competences. Consequently significant funds will be needed, probably somewhat above the cost of the first round. A more precise estimate on the necessary funds can only be done after expert work during the coming months.

Option 2 will have the same impact on the EU budget as Option 1.

As concerns option 3, there will be no impact on the EU budget.

Could the options have significant impacts on (i) simplification, (ii) administrative burden or on (iii) relations with third countries?

(i) No.

(ii) No significant impacts on administrative burden on the Member States. However, in case of the regular data collections there will be some limited burden linked to the data collection and analyses. This will normally be done within an existing national structure (e.g. ministry of education, polling agency).

(iii) No. However, it should be noted that EU approaches to the promotion of multilingualism and language learning are of considerable interest to several international partner countries.

E. Planning of further impact assessment work

When will the impact assessment work start?

The aim of the Communication is to support the improvement of national education and training systems via the open method of coordination by developing complementary EU-level tools, supporting mutual learning and exchange of good practice. Given that the initiative will not propose any new policy measures with significant impacts no impact assessment is foreseen. However, if the impact on the EU budget will be more than 5 Mio € the initiative will be accompanied by an ex ante evaluation as required by the Financial Regulation.

(i) What information and data are already available?

(ii) Will this impact assessment build on already existing impact assessment work or evaluations carried out?

(iii) What further information needs to be gathered?

(iv) How will this be done (e.g. internally or by an external contractor) and by when?

(v) What type and level of analysis will be carried out (cf. principle of proportionate analysis)?

The Commission Communication on a language benchmark could be supported by:

1) The final report on survey's results (prepared by SurveyLang; foreseen for February 2012);

2) Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training

(May 2009);

3) European Parliament resolution "Multilingualism: an asset for Europe and a shared commitment" (March 2009);

4) Council Resolution on a European strategy for multilingualism (November 2008);

5) Commission Communication "An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training" (December 2008);

6) Commission Communication "Framework for the European survey on language competences" (April 2007);

7) Commission Communication "The European Indicator of Language Competence" (August 2005).

Which stakeholders & experts have been/will be consulted, how and at what stage?

The Advisory Board for the European Indicator of Language Competence, established by the Commission's decision in October 2006, has been since the beginning of the project providing the expertise in the field of language testing. The Board had its first meeting in November 2006 and has met 9 times until now. The Board will continue its work also in the future.