

## AT THE INTERFACE OF LIFELONG LEARNING - SUPPLY AND DEMAND - DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES - - BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

This paper outlines the key issues for the above Working Group that is part of the EQUAL Adaptability European Thematic Group (ETG). The purpose of this paper is to provide background information for the Working Group on the *Lifelong Learning* topic to be held at the first meeting of the Liaison Group to be held in Poitiers (France), March 31 to April 1 2003.

### 1. THE EQUAL APPROACH TO THE LIFELONG LEARNING AGENDA

The approach taken by the Adaptability ETG's work on lifelong learning places particular emphasis on the learner and mirrors the approach of the European Union and Member States in promoting a European-wide lifelong learning strategy:

The European Commission Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (2001) emphasises three **principles** underpinning lifelong learning:

- the centrality of the learner
- equality of opportunity
- high quality and relevance.

There are a number of building blocks upon which member states are invited to elaborate their strategies, including:

- building up partnerships;
- analysing learning requirements;
- increasing public and private investment;
- removing the obstacles to access;
- introducing a culture of learning;
- and quality controls and indicators.

The activities of the EQUAL Development Partnerships have linked directly to these building blocks. Moreover, the EQUAL Programme has embraced the broader lifelong learning agenda which encompasses social, personal, civic and employment aspects.

### 2. WHAT IS LIFELONG LEARNING?

The concept of lifelong learning has evolved over time. It addresses both economic and social factors, including personal development and citizenship as well as the adaptability of the labour force. The EU has adopted the following definition<sup>1</sup> of lifelong learning:

- **“All learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.”**

Some key characteristics emerge from this definition:

<sup>1</sup> *Making a European area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, European Commission, 2001.

- acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post-retirement;
- the development of knowledge, skills and competences to enable citizens to:
  - adapt to the knowledge-based society;
  - actively participate in all spheres of social and economic life, taking more control of their future;
- valuing all forms of learning:
  - **formal learning**, such as a degree course followed at university;
  - **non-formal learning**, such as vocational skills acquired at the workplace (this is especially pertinent to SMEs, which often favour non-formal workplace learning);
  - **informal learning**, such as inter-generational learning, for example where parents learn to use ICT through their children.

### 3. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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The move towards a **knowledge-based society** carries both opportunities for personal advancement and the threat of being 'left behind'. The opportunities provided are a potential tool for empowerment. The threats are particularly acute for groups that are already disadvantaged in the labour market. Continual learning and the updating of skills is key to thriving in the changing environment.

The Communication from the European Commission on the *Future of the European Employment Strategy* (2003) recognises that while significant progress has been made with respect to the development of lifelong learning strategies, there is much still to do. Action is required from a range of relevant actors – public authorities, individuals, enterprises, social partners, NGOs and learning providers. Firms need to invest more in the training of adults to increase productivity, update skills and retain workers. The growing **inequality in access to training** is highlighted as a matter for serious concern.

### 4. KEY FOCUS OF THE WORKING GROUP

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Lifelong Learning is a broad topic. Within the European context, the specific focus of the Working Group is on **working at the interface of lifelong learning by taking account of both demand and supply and by developing inclusive policies and practices**. It is tied closely to the EQUAL target group and addresses fundamental forms of discrimination as reflected in access to / delivery of learning in the workplace.

Focusing at the interface means identifying good practice that combines the adaptation of the individuals (in work or out of work) with the adaptation of enterprises, particularly SMEs. There is a strong realisation of the need to build the demand for learning and encourage SMEs to invest in high quality training.

The focus would also include a gender approach.

#### 4.1. SUPPLY AND DEMAND

On the supply side, there is a need to improve **participation and attainment** in education and training across Europe. Traditional educational systems are inflexible, compartmentalised and institution-focused. They need to be re-thought in order to best respond to the challenges of the knowledge society.

However, this alone will not be enough. **Demand-driven learning** provides the skills and competencies required for the changing environment. Implementing the lifelong learning agenda requires a **cultural change** within organisations. The aim is the creation of **learning organisations**, which are characterised by constant updating of skills and competences to better support sustainable growth. In an EQUAL context, this means focussing on systems, attitudes, practices, behaviours etc. that cause and/or contribute to inequality and discrimination.

This requires a step change in a number of areas, including enterprises viewing training and development as part and parcel of what they do rather than something that is done to employees. Managers and supervisors also have a role to play as more effective facilitators for learning.

## 4.2. ROLE OF SMEs IN BUILDING THE DEMAND FOR LEARNING

In this context, SMEs are vital to the delivery of the lifelong learning agenda. They employ a large percentage of Europe's workforce, but offer less training to their employees in comparison to larger organisations.

Another reason why SMEs are a vital source of demand for lifelong learning is that their employees tend to participate less in continuing education than those employed by large enterprises. SMEs have fewer resources to devote to formal training and are arguably more motivated by short-term market imperatives.

Factors involved in **engaging SMEs** and creating learning organisations include:

- increased accessibility (flexible provision has a crucial role here);
- business relevance;
- demand-led provision;
- recognition of non-formal and informal learning;
- and harnessing new methods of delivery.

## 4.3. EQUAL DPs AND TCAs

The mandate of the Working Group is to identify the most concrete good practice examples from EQUAL. The sort of activities being undertaken by EQUAL Development Partnerships (DPs) and Transnational Partnerships (TCAs) which relate to this Working Group include:

- building the demand a) for training and b) for a more diverse workforce;
- developing a 'learning culture' in the workplace;
- strategic planning for employers - introducing training strategies;
- Human Resources planning;
- building strategic lifelong learning partnerships (and networks);
- encouraging SMEs to invest in high-quality training.

The priority links in with one of the three overall topics to emerge from the DP analysis of Theme E partnerships, namely 'providing support services both to learners (in training and in work) and to SMEs'. This was evident in the analysis of DPs in 11 member states. As such, there is a large proportion of DP activities linked to this issue. The question of providing support to learners and SMEs was also a key point to emerge from the Barcelona conference in 2002.

Looking at the TCAs, the demand-side focus is evident. 'Business development' is the second most common area for thematic focus, apparent in 42% of the Adaptability TCAs. Within the business development theme, there is a more extensive focus on SMEs than on specific sectors.

Nonetheless, from an EQUAL perspective, the demand to invest in lifelong learning should also be viewed as an essential policy for the development of citizenship and social cohesion with tangible economic benefits.

It is important to emphasise the employer focus within this priority. It is clear from the TCA analysis that *the main area of commonality for the largest number of partnerships* is the SME focus (be it in relation to lifelong learning or adaptation to change). Over half (58%) of the Adaptability TCAs describe employers as being the key common target for their activities and, of this group, 68% make a specific reference to having an SME focus.

## 4.4. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE WORKING GROUP

The Working Group supports horizontal and vertical mainstreaming at the European level on the topics outlined above. Supporting the dissemination of good practices in implementing the lifelong learning agenda is a key priority. Impacting on policy and practice at the European level is another important objective – especially in terms of building the demand for lifelong learning.

Working at the interface in this way emphasises the need to involve all the relevant stakeholders (both within and outside of EQUAL) and especially to recognise the significance of the role of social partners. If something is good practice, it should be good practice for all the relevant stakeholders and not just some of them. We can see connections between this issue and the EU's aim to innovate in trade offs between employers and employees.

It will also be important to capture the ways in which lifelong learning issues relate to the two transversal issues that have been identified as crucial Adaptability priorities under EQUAL (namely, *ICT Literacy/Access* and *Accreditation*).