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## Realising the full potential of e-learning for education and training

### Committee Opinion<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Economic Affairs and Development

Rapporteur: Ms Antigoni PAPADOPOULOS, Cyprus

### A. Committee conclusions

It is well accepted that in the era of globalisation, Europe's competitiveness and relative wealth will depend on its continued ability to sell ever-higher added value products and services. This added value must be based on the benefits of an advanced knowledge-based economy and society and thus on constant improvement in the level of education and training – seen as a lifelong process – of the population in general and the workforce in particular. Europe's citizens can best prepare to meet the competitive demands of economic and social change through education and training of the highest possible quality. To this end, more should be done to ensure that all acquire skills in information and communication technologies (ICT) and that e-learning becomes an integral part of education and training at all levels alongside more traditional methods.

### B. Explanatory memorandum, by Mrs Papadopoulou

1. Despite the fact that ICT have penetrated almost every aspect of economic activity, 37% of people aged between 16 and 74 in the 25 countries of the European Union (EU) have no basic computer skills, according to a June 2006 Eurostat report,<sup>2</sup> and in September 2007 the EU Commission warned of a digital skills shortage in Europe, at least in certain sectors.<sup>3</sup>
2. E-learning can broadly be seen as the use of ICT to enhance and support teaching and learning. In the last few decades it has developed extensively into an integral, mainstream feature of both publicly and privately financed education and training at all levels: primary, secondary and tertiary, vocational education and training, company training and informal (uncertified) learning. However, more should be done to encourage the application of e-learning to education and training so as to ensure that all acquire the necessary ICT skills to enable them to meet the challenges of rapid social and economic change.
3. E-learning has undoubtedly helped to increase participation in education and training, and the quality and cost-effectiveness of provision, although probably not yet to the degree initially expected.
4. First of all, ICT have increased access to learning. Not only educational institutions but also businesses and such social and cultural institutions as prisons, community centres, museums and centres for people with disabilities have increasingly equipped themselves for e-learning. The average rate of connectivity to the Internet and the number of workstations per pupil, student, trainee or employee are constantly on the increase, providing access to the Internet as a major learning source. ICT have certainly enhanced the quality

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1. See [Doc. 10552](#) tabled by the Committee on Culture, Science and Education.

2. EurActiv.com, "E-skills", 25 April 2006.

3. EU Commission, "E-skills for the 21st century: fostering competitiveness, growth and jobs", COM(2007)496 final, 7 September 2007.



of teaching and learning, allowing for greater flexibility and attention to individual needs. E-learning methods allow individuals to advance at their own pace and to take up content according to their own specific level of development. Thus, for example, in the context of the integration of migrants, e-learning can be an invaluable tool for teaching the language of the host country.

5. However, it is of course not enough to have the equipment, which is becoming more and more complex, it is essential to master the skills to use it. Training in ICT use must be adequately funded. Critically, this must include the training of teachers and trainers who must fully understand the applications and implications of the information society technology.

6. Teachers and parents must be made aware of the potential dangers to the health and safety of children exposed to ICT, including computer addiction and neurological risks. Furthermore, ICT must not be allowed to undermine the interpersonal relations and contacts that form the essential basis for successful learning and the development of social skills.

7. Much has been made of the danger of the so-called “digital divide”, that is the gap between those with ICT access and skills and those without. Social cohesion requires that digital literacy for all should be a major objective of the knowledge-based society, and both national and European policies should do everything possible to reduce the gap. In this respect in particular, the Council of Europe, which has long experience of co-operation in education and training and in promoting social cohesion, should do everything possible to support the European Union’s comprehensive Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-13, which builds on its former e-learning programmes, and aims to become a world quality reference.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, digital literacy will be considerably boosted through the pledge of the European Alliance on Skills for Employability, an ICT industry consortium, to train 20 million Europeans in ICT by 2010.<sup>5</sup>

8. The fact that ICT eliminate distance and open new horizons, allowing institutions to communicate and enabling e-learning even across frontiers, constitutes a potential economy of scale, in that a given set of study materials, teaching staff and infrastructure can serve ever greater numbers of students without geographical limits. However, initial high expectations have not yet materialised, and concerns about intellectual property rights (IPR) may hinder the open sharing of information.<sup>6</sup> High quality e-learning material may only be made available when the legitimate expectation of content developers for financial returns on their investment is reconciled with the freedom of users to handle information as they please.

9. Public-private partnerships, which have been seen as most suitable for infrastructure development,<sup>7</sup> may be a useful avenue for the development of course materials at a reasonable cost to the user, and this would surely be in the public interest. According to Wikipedia, itself a major (and free) source of e-learning, the e-learning industry (delivery, content and infrastructure) is conservatively estimated to be worth over €38 billion worldwide.<sup>8</sup>

10. Businesses are using ICT and the Internet to provide their employees with opportunities for global learning, for example about the development of new products and processes, or in-house training in maintenance skills. As pointed out by the European Economic and Social Council, particular attention should be paid to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which have a key role to play in stimulating economic growth and creating jobs, with a view to ensuring that they make the most of ICT for training purposes.<sup>9</sup> They certainly do not have the training budgets of larger companies.

#### *Amendment proposals*

11. In the light of the above, the rapporteur proposes the following amendments to the draft recommendation contained in the report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education:

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4. Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning.

5. EurActiv.com, op. cit.

6. OECD Policy Brief, “E-learning in tertiary education”, December 2005.

7. European Investment Bank, eLearning Industry Group, European Commission, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) Workshop on the Role of Public-Private Partnership for eLearning in Europe, 25-26 November 2002.

8. Wikipedia, article on electronic learning.

9. European Economic and Social Committee, “Opinion on the contribution of IT-supported lifelong learning to European competitiveness, industrial change and social capital development”, CCMI/034, 13 September 2006.

1. In paragraph 1, after the second sentence, insert a new sentence to read:  
*“High expectations have not yet fully materialised.”*
2. In paragraph 4, after the first sentence, add the following new sentence:  
*“In an era of globalisation and rapid technological change, Europe’s competitiveness and wealth will depend on its ability to become an advanced knowledge-based society through constant improvement in lifelong education and training of the population in general and the workforce in particular, including e-learning.”*
3. In paragraph 4, replace the words “the growing parallelism of work and family obligations” with the following words: “the need to reconcile both family and working life”.
4. In paragraph 5, add the following text: “In the context of the integration of migrants, e-learning can be an invaluable tool for teaching the language and other skills needed in the host country.”
5. In paragraph 6, add the following text:  
*“The Assembly stresses the need to protect children from the potential dangers of ICT to their health and safety, including computer addiction and neurological risks. Furthermore, ICT must not be allowed to undermine the interpersonal relations and contacts that form the essential basis for successful learning and the development of social skills.”*
6. In paragraph 8, add the following sentence:  
*“In this context, national legislation should be updated and ways should be found to provide adequate funding beyond state provision, including public-private partnerships.”*
7. In paragraph 9, after the word “companies”, add the following words: “especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)”.
8. In paragraph 9, after the words “company training”, add the words: “as well as encouraging public-private partnerships”.
9. In paragraph 10, after the word “Internet”, add the following words: “and to adopt measures to combat the digital divide in order to close the gap between those who have access to ICT and the acquisition of ICT skills and those who do not, thus ensuring digital literacy for all”.
10. After paragraph 10, add a new paragraph worded as follows:  
*“Nevertheless, the Assembly is aware that concerns about intellectual property rights (IPR) may hinder the open sharing of information. High quality e-learning material may only be made available when the legitimate expectation of content developers for financial returns on their investment is reconciled with the freedom of users to handle information as they please.”*
11. In paragraph 11, add the following sentence: “The Assembly underlines its support for the European Union’s comprehensive Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-13, which builds on its former e-learning programmes and aims to become a world quality reference. The Assembly encourages the Commission to make full use of the possibility foreseen in the programme for cooperation with the Council of Europe, which has long experience of co-operation in education and training and in promoting social cohesion.”
12. In paragraph 12.1, add the following words: “both in the formal and informal spheres”.
13. In paragraph 12.5, after the word “Education”, add the words “to propose relevant national or regional legislation and”.
14. In paragraph 12.7, after the word “adult”, add the words “and higher”.
15. In paragraph 12.8, after the word “conferences”, add the words “at the Council of Europe”.

Reporting committee: Committee on Culture, Science and Education.

Committee seized for opinion: Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.

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