

CONCLUSIONS

We open this session, in which the Scientific Committee is going to report briefly on the ideas and thoughts that, in our view, faithfully reflect the content of the Conference.

Taking as both our starting point and benchmark the recommendations included in the European Commission's Memorandum on continuous learning (the new, updated interpretation of which we were given by Ms. Angelique Verli in the opening paper of the Conference), and in line with the contents and structure of that Memorandum, the Scientific Committee has decided to organise the presentation of its conclusions into four thematic divisions.

So, without more ado, we now present the results of our considerations and reflections.

ONE

FINANCING LIFELONG LEARNING

The issue of financing is one of the key questions to be resolved if one is looking to guarantee that, in the future, lifelong learning is a regular practice in our society. In the Scientific Committee's view, four conclusions may be drawn from the papers given by Messrs. Wurzburg, Stark and Larose that should serve as reference points for our reflections:

1 – lifelong learning implies an economic cost in all cases, even when the cost varies depending on the reference scenario.

2 – even though the costs of lifelong learning have not risen spectacularly in recent years, in the mid- and long-term substantial increases are forecast, there being little or no reason to expect the trend to change.

3 - given the above, it is vital to clarify what type of institutions, entities and people should take part in financing continuous learning, in what proportion and to what extent they should do so and what mechanisms could be started up to that end.

4 – the culture of continuous or lifelong learning and its practical expression, the actions leading to such learning, will only be sustainable if the economic costs are acceptable and the benefits clearly appreciable. In short, the result of the equation between cost and benefit will decide the future of the activity.

Taking these four conclusions as its starting point, the Scientific Committee also detected basic agreement amongst the speakers on the following principles:

1 - Governments and public institutions are not in a position to satisfy, on their own at least, the costs involved in a generalised policy designed to promote lifelong learning.

2 – In consequence, lifelong or continuous learning must be cofinanced by different agents, entities and institutions, including in some cases individual learners themselves. In any case, financing clearly requires varied and flexible formulas.

3 – Continuous learning must necessarily produce benefits, some more intangible than others, it being absolutely vital also to design models for measuring and evaluating results.

4 – It is therefore a vital priority to promote a culture of compensation amongst all kinds of learners based on solid commitments, including the requirement of progress and improvements in levels of yield.

Taking this core of basic agreements as a reference, the Committee considers Mr. Stark's proposals for financing lifelong learning particularly suggestive, as they are an excellent platform for orienting the debate on this issue. The Committee is interested in the following:

- 1- Exploring bank financing models for part of lifelong learning, promoting loan policies for businessmen and workers.
- 2- Developing tax incentives to stimulate learning.
- 3- Promoting policies of licences, taking account of the results of learning actions.
- 4- Distinguishing between different training actions by financing in some cases, but only actions that give effective, tangible qualifications to those requiring them.
- 5- Promoting economic incentives for some potential learners, on grounds of age, competence level and social and cultural level.

Finally, the Scientific Committee also wishes to draw attention to the fact, underlined by the speakers themselves, that economic incentives will not by themselves be sufficient to increase the learning demand significantly. Which is why, independently of the financing or cofinancing models adopted, we must insist that any increase in the demand for learning is largely linked to information and diffusion policies. Such policies should be oriented towards stimulating favourable attitudes and genuine commitment both in individual learners and in the institutional and business groups involved.

TWO

REGIONAL EXPERIENCES

During this Conference, we have also heard about experiences in continuous learning in the Netherlands, Wales, the region of Salzburg and the Basque Country. The Scientific Committee has verified that, independently of the territorial, regional, cultural or social idiosyncrasies affecting any particular case, it is possible to identify a set of action guidelines emphasised by all the speakers. These are mentioned below:

- 1.- Respect for local features and needs

Bearing in mind the fact that the European Union lacks powers affecting continuous learning policies, speakers underlined the importance of responding with a local, centripetal logic to the centrifugal, global logic that establishes the need for knowledge and for continuous learning. One of the keys highlighted by the speaker from the Netherlands was the need to avoid establishing European frameworks.

Which is why the Committee insists on the need for all actions in these areas to be linked as a priority to the needs of the learner's immediate environment, which should provide the reference point guiding strategic options.

2.- Coordination is vital

All speakers considered the exchange of experiences a vital activity for improving and reviewing the lines of action laid out and also for stimulating joint reflection. In this respect, not only were we able to verify the existence of coordination bodies at different levels (local, regional, national etc.), but it also became clear that in some places international exchange and cooperation bodies are now being promoted. This is the case of, for example, EARLALL, an Association specifically oriented towards comparing and reviewing continuous learning policies.

3.- Governments must be involved

In all the cases discussed, the awareness and responsiveness of governments was decisive in promoting plans and actions designed to stimulate continuous learning. The Commission understands that a basic task of governments is to act as catalysts and facilitators of any initiatives being started up, within an activity where the participation of a range of entities and institutions must at the same time be stimulated and coordinated.

4.- Shared objectives

All the speakers gave special attention to describing the objectives for continuous learning activities. Independently of more specific or detailed approaches, the major general benchmark objectives quoted at the Conference were: attention to the needs of individuals, the conception of learning as a global activity that transcends the purely work or labour dimension, the search for greater levels of equality and social inclusion and the determined drive to innovate. The Commission therefore wishes to highlight the existence of a basic, fundamental agreement on targets and objectives, beyond the wealth and variety of media used to date.

5.- Thought as a prerequisite for action

Speakers also referred to the processes of reflection and analysis occurring in governments, parliaments and local organisations. The Committee wishes to insist on the fact that the rate at which the economy, science, technology and knowledge in general are evolving, obliges us to make a permanent effort to analyse and understand scenarios that are changing rapidly. The Scientific Committee also wishes to underline the fact that self-knowledge alone makes it possible to adapt and commit all the resources available to achieving the objectives set.

Once these common lines of action have been identified, the Committee also wishes to draw attention to the major effort being made to create and develop specific structures, an effort that can be gleaned just by looking at the content of the papers presented. Two action models were detected that certainly seem to be complementary, and the Committee wishes to highlight them as a means of emphasising the broad and varied strategic potential open to continuous learning.

In Wales and the Basque Country there is a clear, fundamental concern for creating and developing structures that promote joint action on continuous learning. Examples in Wales include the ELWa organisation, the Communal Consortia and Careers Wales, all

of them different bodies working on the identification of demand, the coordination of agents and players and assessment and management of learning processes. In the Basque Country, attention should be drawn to the Euskadi 2000Tres initiative and other complementary action taken by provincial councils, the Basque Vocational Training Plan and the developments introduced in the frame of adult education. The Committee understands that, in both cases the need to promote this kind of structure is intimately connected to the historical evolution and ongoing contemporary processes of political institutionalisation in Wales and the Basque Country.

As far as the Netherlands and the region of Salzburg are concerned, the Committee detected activity more focused on the personal, cultural and social development of individuals, with the introduction of a huge number of programmes covering a wide range of needs, which in many cases are not linked to work or professional promotion. Both experiences reflect a particularly deep commitment to the “right to learn”, a commitment that is especially explicit with regard to the Salzburg region, perhaps due to the fact that adult education is not a right regulated by the Constitution of Austria. With regard to the Netherlands, the Committee wishes to highlight the speaker’s call for attention to “life-wide learning”.

To end this thematic division, the Committee wishes to express its satisfaction at the complementary nature of the experiences discussed and their information and training content.

THREE

THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

We have had the opportunity to compare different experiences relating to the use of the resources offered by the new technologies and their potential in the framework of the knowledge society. The Scientific Committee thinks it a good idea to merge approaches and experiences from public initiatives, as is the case of the TRIO project run in the region of Tuscany, the initiatives run by different institutions in Scotland, the Basque Government Department of Education’s Continuous Learning portal and CISCO’s E-Learning strategies. The Committee would like to synthesise the set of contributions by putting forward the following main ideas:

ATTENTION TO PROCESS AND CONTENT

All speakers shared a concern that the resources offered by the new technologies needed to be applied to the learning process as much as the actual learning contents. In this respect, the Committee considers it crucial to understand that information and communication technologies are in themselves a field requiring exploration, to ensure they do not simply become new forms of knowledge transmission, facilitating better, more economical services. They will only be an effective agent for change if preferential attention is paid to contents, which are the essence of knowledge.

A BROAD, DIVERSIFIED OFFER

In this last sense the Committee has verified that the set of proposals are oriented towards the design of wide-ranging, diversified portals capable of providing very different forms of access to knowledge and the development of a broad range of skills and competence. Above all, these services should give priority to the needs and characteristics of users.

THE NETWORK NEEDS USERS

The Committee has also seen the importance of facilitating Internet access to the majority of citizens, through policies facilitating and subsidising the purchase of computers (as in the case of the Basque Government), by establishing free reference centres (such as the Tele-Training Centers promoted in Tuscany), or by experimenting with any other formula oriented towards the same objective. Internet's potential is in indirect proportion to the real number of users. Which is why the Committee insists on the need to introduce sustained strategies that guarantee increases in the number of people wishing to learn and use the Internet.

AN EFFICIENT TOOL FOR EVERYONE

Online learning systems also have to demonstrate that they are capable of becoming an effective instrument for a broad range of groups. One cannot forget that large sectors of the population are still not yet familiarised with computers and are unaware of their potential. In these conditions, much of the success of E-learning will have to be based on accessible, easy-to-assimilate contents. Which is why, in the Committee's view, intensive and extensive use of information and communication technologies will only be achieved by taking account of the needs and capabilities of the different types of learners.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

The amount and variety of tools available may confuse and disorient users. Only the culture of training in, and the guided use of, the new technologies can guarantee their correct use and avoid the sensation of incompetence felt by many learners, producing a negative result that might well become irreversible. In this respect, the Committee wishes to insist on the importance of establishing training and assessment as one of the priorities of the services offer in a bid to guarantee that the new technologies are used correctly and in a sustainable way.

COMING TO YOU LIVE

If, as seems clear, part of the enormous potential of e-learning is its capacity to adapt in time and space to users' needs, the Committee understands that on-line management and assessment of the learning process is one of the keys to success. Particularly in the initial periods of adaptation and personalisation of the training activity, the possibility of attention in real time to users' needs will have to be taken very much into account by service providers.

PROMOTING SYNERGIES

Finally, the experience of the Conference itself shows that cooperation and communication between different entities and organisations enhances knowledge quite considerably. Which is why the Committee insists on the need for backing for practices that enable information and knowledge to be shared. All experience transmitted helps to convert information and data into added value and knowledge.

FOUR

LIFELONG LEARNING AND INTEGRATION

The sessions held today, 27 March, were devoted to analysing experiences in the more specific area of adults.

The importance of adult education lies in the fact that it constitutes, in most cases, the only opportunity that a number of groups have to access basic training. Precisely for this reason, the Scientific Committee understands that adult education is intimately linked to objectives of cultural and work integration. In short, objectives of social integration.

The experiences described have highlighted the fact that, in the framework established by the modern conception of learning as a permanent activity, adult education is a modality with some specific features. Which is why, in this last thematic section, the Scientific Committee has made an effort to make a summary to underscore these specific features. The Committee has opted to order speakers' contributions through the following ten conclusions:

1.- OBJECTIVES

Adult education pursues three basic objectives:

- a) Social and labour inclusion of groups with lower levels of training, by favouring the acquisition of basic skills and competence levels, promoting self-learning and bringing about changes in values and attitudes towards knowledge.
- b) Updating and increasing the capacities of adults in jobs, giving a response to the variety of individual needs, as a way of combating people's exclusion in advance from the labour market as a result of poor or insufficient qualifications.
- c) Collaborating with organisations on efficient people and knowledge management, by stimulating the capability possessed by all organisations to generate new knowledge.

2.- TARGET PUBLICS

Two major target publics have been identified:

- a) Unemployed and/or people in jobs with clear deficiencies in their initial training and who in general have low levels of information and awareness of the individual and social value of knowledge.
- b) Unemployed and/or people in jobs with mid/high initial levels of training who need to maintain and increase their personal and professional capacities.

The Committee notes that although the need for training is inversely proportional to the levels of basic training of most people, the demand for training is even higher amongst the better-trained groups. This means it is necessary to improve the systems of information and access for groups most needing individual and labour promotion.

3.- STRATEGIES

Through the papers presented at the Conference, the Scientific Committee has verified the existence of a great variety of ways such offers can be made or presented, the variety of organisations taking part, of teaching and learning models and of the agents and players involved in financing.

The Scientific Committee understands that, far from being a problem, this variety and diversity of strategies and tools is a source of substantial benefits. It enables teaching scenarios to be broadened and diversified, thus generating experiences that can be shared and compared, while facilitating greater and simplified access to learning for a heterogeneous group of users.

4.- NETWORKS

From the viewpoint of adult education and its relationship with continuous or lifelong learning, the Committee understands that a central objective is the creation of channels of coordination and information channels concerning the offer of products and services designed to improve training and knowledge levels. Networks should not favour an increase in structures and bureaucracy. In the age of information, Networks are intangible instruments for collaboration and exchange. Generating and developing Networks is a means of assuring a permanent source of innovation and flexibility, while ensuring that information itself is converted into new knowledge.

5.- SCENARIOS AND MODALITIES

In contemporary societies, scenarios for adult education are very varied and should be established depending on the characteristics of the learners and on the objectives set. Learning can occur via organisations integrated in formal education systems, in independent organisations and with different degrees of specialisation. It can also occur through work experience, or via learning processes adapted to individual needs. So self-teaching can combine perfectly with hands-on training actions and online assessment and training models.

In the Committee's opinion, the chance to build different but compatible scenarios, far from disfiguring and dispersing learning channels, increases enormously diffusion of and access to learning processes and the potential options open to the participants in such processes.

6.- THE AGENTS

The papers all underlined the fact that responsibility is shared between institutions (public and private), educational, business and cultural bodies and regulated and non-regulated training centres. The Scientific Committee wishes therefore to insist on the importance of promoting this culture of "shared responsibility", since, given the existence of common problems, the participation of different institutional, business and

social agents enables us to convert the basic objective of favouring and facilitating learning into a multiple objective.

7.- APPROACHES

The Scientific Committee wishes to emphasise the need to develop different approaches to the management of adult education, without forgetting this activity's capacity to integrate. In the Committee's opinion, there are at least three approaches that should guide adult education-related actions and learning.

- a) Favour a change of culture, values and activities in the adult population, it being essential for them to understand the reasons behind the change and the need for, and advantages of, continuous learning.
- b) Attend to and adapt the learning offer and processes to the needs and requirements of learners. This is not only to guarantee a better, more efficient response by learners, but also because the learner groups are also a potential source of knowledge that need to be taken account of.
- c) Aim for permanent innovation that must be reflected in the offer of products and services.

8.- CONTENTS

The modern organisation of knowledge should respond to the ongoing transformation of the knowledge and know how needed and required by a constantly changing environment. In this context, the Committee understands that contents organised in relatively stable course packages are no longer the ideal benchmark. The organisation and management of contents must attend, at the very least, to the following requirements:

- a) The mechanisms to be used in the learning process, with particular care and attention given to the use of the new technologies and their potential.
- b) The characteristics and special features of learners, considered individually and as groups, which includes social and cultural variables, age and motivation.
- c) The objectives established in each learning process.

9.- FINANCING

The Committee considers that participation in the financing of adult education should not be entirely and exclusively a question for public institutions. In any case, the participation of institutions and entities shall depend on the objective pursued by each action, the priority being to guarantee a plural, open system making offers available to a very wide range of potential learners.

10.- THE RESULTS

The Committee wishes to note that, by the very nature of knowledge in our societies, a large part of the results will be intangible in the short term. However, facilitating the access of learners with lower training levels to learning processes is a crucial move in achieving the double objective of avoiding their early exclusion from the labour market and favouring the social and labour inclusion of the majority of the population.

Finally, the Scientific Committee wishes to praise the quality of the papers presented, to thank the speakers for their efforts, and to thank everyone here for their participation and interest and to conclude the presentation of these conclusions by summing up in five ideas the wealth and potential that the concept of continuous learning suggests to us:

A CULTURE

A COMMITMENT TO INNOVATION

A NEED

A SOCIAL BENEFIT

A COLLECTIVE CHALLENGE

Thank you.-