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## **Guidance in the knowledge society**

Lifelong Guidance Policies and Systems Conference: Building the Stepping Stones

Jyväskylä, Finland, 6–8 November 2006

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Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today at this conference on guidance.

I would like to thank the Finnish presidency for organising this conference. Given the close links that guidance has with the worlds of education and work, it is especially gratifying that the Finnish Ministries of Labour and Education, working together, agreed to make this topic a priority.

I would also like to thank our host, the Institute of Educational research of the University of Jyväskylä, both for hosting us and for the hard work that went into preparing the conference.

What do we understand by Lifelong Guidance?

Guidance is a very important issue. It deals with individuals' capacities, helps them to make decisions about their education, training and work, and supports their economic and social integration.

Guidance ultimately implies supporting citizens in some of the fundamental life choices which flow from their personal situations and backgrounds, their studies and careers.

Guidance therefore has ramifications in many fields: schools, higher education, the voluntary sector and employment services.

And as we increasingly talk of lifelong guidance, the topic becomes broader and it is easy to lose focus.

So, even though I am addressing an audience of experts, it is useful to begin by clarifying briefly what we are talking about when we discuss lifelong guidance at the European level.

The cornerstones of our work are the Commission's Communication on Lifelong Learning of November 2001, which identified information, guidance and counselling as a priority for action, and the subsequent Council Resolution of May 2004 on Guidance throughout Life in Europe.

These initiatives marked important stages in a process which built on more than a decade of previous work.

The Council Resolution stresses that all European citizens should have access to guidance services at all life stages, with particular attention for individuals and groups at risk. It also makes it clear that much remains to be done. The Resolution's title refers to "strengthening Policies, Systems and Practices", and I am sure you would be the first to agree that action is needed in all three of these domains.

But I am optimistic. Guidance is now part of a wider framework which has gradually been taking shape under the revised Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs.

In the context of this strategy, the Commission has recently called for high-quality education systems which are both efficient and equitable.

Improved guidance provision is crucial in this respect, particularly in helping to ensure that the outcomes of education and training are positive for people from all socio-economic backgrounds and that the treatment of individuals reflects their specific learning needs.

Under what we know as the "Education and Training 2010" work programme, guidance is now clearly seen as part of the lifelong learning strategies which Member States are committed to putting in place.

A meeting with Member States and stakeholders which reviewed the development of these strategies a month ago showed that many countries are starting to make progress towards fulfilling this commitment.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Why is guidance so important? I do not need to convince you of its importance of guidance. But it takes on additional significance when seen in the light of other, related developments.

The logic of lifelong learning places the emphasis on the individual learner, not on the education and training system.

Changes in society and the economy mean that people are no longer set on a linear career path through their early education and training experience.

They now need to be able to change pathways between jobs and between learning opportunities. They also need to learn how to have their skills and knowledge validated.

So, while the range of opportunities is exploding, choice can become bewildering, and the individual needs more assistance to be able to navigate a personal pathway.

With the European Qualifications Framework – the EQF – we are shifting radically towards qualifications based on learning outcomes, whether these come about through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

ECVET, the credit system for vocational education and training, will make it easier to shift between parts of the training system and to combine different types of learning.

Both the EQF and ECVET will contribute to mobility. The current European Year of Workers' Mobility highlights the fact that mobility is increasingly seen not in a national but in a European context.

So guidance practice will have to take account of these new emerging instruments and of the need to support the European Labour Market.

What has been achieved so far?

Fortunately, we already have much to build upon. Let me give you just some key examples:

- The Euroguidance network was established in 1992. Its aims are to promote the European dimension in guidance activities, and to provide quality information on mobility. Its main target group is the guidance community.
- The PLOTEUS portal, set up in 2003, is a Europe-wide service to facilitate access to information on learning opportunities in Europe.

Its aims are improving employability and reducing skill gaps. Today it provides information in 24 languages, and has about 90,000 visitors per month. It is an important guidance tool for citizens wishing to move abroad for education or training purposes, and for those advising them.

- The Handbook on Career Guidance for Policymakers is a joint undertaking by the Commission and the OECD. Published in 2004, it provides a checklist of issues to be dealt with and possible responses, including examples of best practice. It covers four broad areas: guidance for young people and for adults, access to guidance and improving support systems.
- Under the current Leonardo da Vinci programme, we have supported two European joint actions, each bringing together elements of the guidance systems of six countries. These projects have just come to completion, and it is important that we build on their achievements and carry the work forward under the new Lifelong Learning Programme.

- In carrying out its work, the Commission has been greatly helped by expertise from many external sources. Since 2002, this expertise has been channelled in particular through an Expert Group, which draws on knowledge from a wide range of domains including education and labour ministries, social partners, stakeholder groups and international bodies. I would like to take this opportunity to thank these experts for their contribution over the last 4 years.

The Council resolution of 2004 is both a summing-up of previous achievements and a commitment to carry on. Among other things, it calls for:

- High-quality guidance provision for all European citizens, accessible at all stages of their lives to enable them to manage their learning and work pathways
- further co-operation in the area of guidance through actions and policies developed primarily in the context of the follow-up to the Lisbon strategy

This conference provides an opportunity to review progress since the adoption of the Resolution, but it should also give a sense of direction to our work from here forward – at European, but especially at national level.

Guidance throughout Europe is provided through a wide diversity of structures, actors and practices. Such diversity provides a rich basis for cooperation and mutual learning.

However, there is urgent need to strengthen coordination between policy makers and providers at all levels and I see this as a strategic objective of this conference and its follow-up.

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I would like to highlight the careful preparation which has gone into the organisation of this ambitious Finnish Presidency conference.

The composition of national delegations seems to me to reflect a new approach, in that they constitute real country teams.

These teams are composed of policy-makers from ministries of education and labour, public employment services, social-partner and wider civil-society organisations, researchers, practitioners and Euroguidance centres.

Those responsible for guidance activities and their stakeholders are the key target of this conference.

They are supported in their work by a range of European and wider international bodies and organisations, many of which are present today.

Having in one conference teams capable both of discussing national situations internally and of comparing experiences in the wider European context is a new element.

Some of the experts have nicknamed it “conference zero” because it marks the beginning of something new.

Our objective is to bring together the various efforts under way, which are at different stages, with different actors, and in different countries.

The new Lifelong Learning Programme, which will run from 2007 to 2013 provides new opportunities to deal in a more comprehensive way with issues that span the range of vocational and general, formal and non-formal learning.

To help develop cooperation between Member States, stakeholders and providers of guidance throughout Europe, I am pleased to announce that the Commission will launch a call for proposals under the new programme for setting-up of a broad-based European network which will create the environment for structured exchange based on common priority issues.

From our discussions with experts and practitioners, we have formed the view that national mechanisms for ensuring the integrated, lifelong character of guidance are often fragile. In many instances, these mechanisms do not even exist.

So the first element in building such a European network could be the emergence of a national guidance forum or similar structure in each country.

It is of course up to the countries to decide if they want to take this step. We hope that there will be broad support for the initiative and for this approach across a large number of European countries and across a wide spectrum of stakeholders.

These issues can be talked through in the workshops which will take place during the conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Without prejudice to the intentions of future presidencies, I would welcome the opportunity to review progress using a similar approach in a couple of years' time.

The reward for all these efforts will come from the quality of the exchange of ideas that comes from you, the representatives of the European "guidance community".

Thank you.