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E-skills for the 21st century: fostering competitiveness, growth and jobs

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

E-Skills Industry Leadership Board Launch Event

Brussels, 7th June 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I am very pleased to participate today at the launch event of the e-Skills Industry Leadership Board and to meet with all its founding members. It is important for us to see that the ICT industry is now ready to mobilise itself to promote e-skills and digital literacy in Europe. I hope that you will succeed in convincing others to join you.
- Your initiative is addressing an issue at the heart of the policy challenges faced by the European Union. Developing e-skills for the 21st century is a formidable task.
- The world is embarking on a new phase in global competition. An important priority for business leaders is to recruit the best talents wherever they can find them in the world. We keep learning about large numbers of engineers emerging from Universities in China and India. At the same time SMEs have difficulties to acquire the necessary e-skills to adopt efficiently ICT and develop new business models.

Innovation starts with people and this is why e-skills are important. They are not just pure technical skills: successful innovation in ICT requires also cross-disciplinary, cognitive and problem-solving skills as well as an understanding of the fundamentals of business.

A highly skilled and adaptable workforce will be the foundation for Europe's competitiveness and prosperity in the 21st century. This can only be done by building a more dynamic and cohesive economy based on skills and knowledge, which are at the centre of the new Lisbon Partnership for Growth and Jobs that we launched in 2005.

Market surveys reveal that e-skills are a key to employment and inclusion in Europe. E-skills are increasingly the entry-ticket to the job market and to better jobs. Last year at the Riga conference on e-Inclusion, Minister Gago from Portugal concluded his speech by asking: "are e-skills a new doorway to lifelong learning and to increased educational attainment?"

Yes, we must recognise that it is increasingly the case.

However, Eurostat is reporting that 37% of European citizens have no computer skills whatsoever, while only 22% seem to be acquainted with a wide range of computer activities. A lack of basic e-skills will prevent these people from participating fully in the 21st knowledge-based economy and society.

A recent foresight study on e-skills confirmed that while demand for e-skills is growing and the business cycle is improving, supply is declining. Other sources report a decline in the number of students starting ICT courses. Young people seem less and less interested in studying mathematics, sciences and technology. The gender issue still remains, as less than 20% of ICT practitioners in the EU are women.

This will inevitably lead to increasing shortages in the future.

These are not only felt in Europe. In the United States the debate is now focusing on the need to increase significantly the number of visas for ICT practitioners.

The demand for e-skills is growing.

The Commission has not remained passive on the front of e-skills. We established a European e-Skills Forum with all relevant stakeholders. The Forum released its report on "e-Skills for Europe: Towards 2010 and Beyond". Follow-up activities resulted in steady progress being made with a view to prepare a long-term agenda.

The European e-Skills 2006 Conference and the report of the ICT Task Force – which we launched in the frame of our new modern industry policy - constituted at the end of 2006 another important milestone.

Three key messages emerged:

First, it is essential to adopt a long-term and consistent e-skills agenda;

Second, co-operation between the public and private sectors must be improved in order to link effectively basic e-skills training, higher education and professional development;

Third, industry and policy makers should act more decisively and consistently regarding their strategies to promote the attractiveness of ICT education, jobs and careers.

There is now a broad agreement on the main challenges and the key components of a long-term e-skills agenda. They are basically the following:

- Longer term cooperation between public authorities, industry, academia, trade unions and associations through scalable and sustainable multi-stakeholder partnerships;
- Human resources investment to ensure sufficient public and private sector investments in e-skills education;
- Attractiveness and the promotion of science, maths and ICT as well as role models, job profiles and career perspectives;
- Employability and e-inclusion and the development of digital literacy and e-competence actions tailored to the needs of groups at risk of exclusion;
- Lifelong acquisition of e-skills and the promotion of better and more user-centric e-learning approaches.

Many of these are of the responsibility of the Member States. Some actions have a clear EU dimension and five major action lines at EU level have been identified:

- Promoting long-term cooperation between stakeholders and monitoring progress
- Developing EU-wide actions and tools such as a European e-competence framework; quality criteria for existing e-skills certifications, a European portal etc.
- Empowering future generations
- Fostering employability and social inclusion, with a major initiative on e-Inclusion foreseen by my colleague Mrs Reding in 2008,
- Making better and greater use of e-learning

E-skills will make an ever-growing contribution to growth, jobs and social cohesion, three areas high on the agenda of the European Commission.

The way forward to the widening and deepening of e-skills in Europe is through dialogue with stakeholders and partnerships for action. It is extremely valuable as it provides a unique opportunity to deepen mutual understanding of key issues and contribute to deliver real solutions.

For example, we believe that the ICT industry can bring an important contribution to the development of a European e-Competence framework, monitoring the demand for e-skills, raising awareness, building bridges between formal and industry-based qualifications, delivering better training and e-learning platforms, fostering scalable and sustainable public private partnerships as well as reaching a critical mass by pooling resources, expertises and experiences.

We count on the mobilisation of the ICT industry and on your proactive contribution in ensuring the effectiveness of our follow-up actions.

These will include a policy Communication on "e-Skills for the 21st Century: Fostering Competitiveness, Growth and Jobs Development" to be adopted before summer and an initiative on e-Inclusion in 2008 in line with the Riga Declaration adopted in June 2006.

I welcome again your initiative and I invite stakeholders to join you in this effort.

Best wishes and thank you for your attention!