

# From Brussels to Lisbon: The European Round Table Education-Agenda put into Practice by the European Commission

**Nico Hirtt**

*(Appel pour une école démocratique, Brussels)*

*Paper presented at the conference “Globalisation, Identities and Education Policy in Europe”, University of Keele (UK), 28 June 2001*

Since the end of the 80's, the European education systems have been submitted to an unceasing flow of criticism and reforms: decentralisation, growing autonomy of the schools, deregulation of the programs, more attention to skills and less attention to knowledge, diverse partnerships between education and industry, massive introduction of Information and Communication Technology, fast development of private, for profit education. The resemblance between the education policies of various European — and more generally, industrialised — countries is far too strong to be a matter of chance or the caprice of some education ministers or pedagogic searchers. There have to be mighty common determinants and political forces, which sustain this common education policy.

The main idea of my last book, “*Les nouveaux maîtres de l’Ecole*” (“*The new masters of school*”) is that these mutations mark a new identity between school and business, namely: the transition from the era of “massification” of education to the era of “merchandization” of education. In a context of great economic uncertainty and of growing inequality on the labour market, the education system is summoned to adapt itself, to sustain more efficiently the economic competition, in a threefold process: first, by educating the workforce; 2<sup>nd</sup>, by educating and stimulating the consumers; and third, by opening itself to the conquest of the markets. As a matter of fact, we have to speak about a threefold “merchandization”, that concerns the education system in all its dimensions: *curriculae*, organization, management and even pedagogic methods. As the European experts say in one of their main documents: “The features of the 21st century company must be taken into account by education and training systems”<sup>1</sup>

This process is only a new step in a long-term evolution of the capitalist education systems through the twentieth century. Primary school that developed in Europe in the 19th century was essentially, a part of the state ideological apparatus. Its main function was not to produce skilled workforces, but to instil some political and moral values, to counter the growing danger of socialist ideology. When Jules Ferry founded the French “republican school” after the repression of the “Commune de Paris”, in 1871, he said: “We ascribe the state the only role it may have in education: maintaining a certain state moral, certain doctrines that are important to its preservation”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the mass graves of the First World War are the

---

<sup>1</sup> Reiffers Commission, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training*, report of the study group on education and training, 1996

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Edwy Péné in *Le Monde* du 14 septembre 1980.

historical testimonies of how successful the European capitalist societies have been in using education to instil patriotism.

On the other hand, secondary and higher education of the 19th century were reserved for children of the higher classes, to get the knowledge that would give them the ability and the power to exert their domination. But from the beginning of the 20th century, the technological development in the industry and the growth of the state administration created a need for some more skilled workforces. Progressively the secondary school opened vocational classes where a minority, the most worthy children of the working class, could expect a chance of social ascension. Thereby the education system began to act as an instrument of social selection. The performance of the children, at the end of their primary education, became the criterion for deciding who would continue in the secondary school.

## The Golden Sixties

The economical role of education dramatically increased after WWII, during the 30 years of strong and almost permanent economic growth, of heavy and long-time technological innovations, such as electrification of the railroad, harbour and airport infrastructures, highways, nuclear technology, telecommunications, petrochemical industry, etc. Sectors that used low-skilled workforces, like agriculture, mines or quarries, were in decline. Upcoming sectors, like mechanical and chemical industries, electronics, electro mechanics, bank-services, repair stations, state administrations, and so on, needed more and more high skilled workforces. It was an era that demanded a general and permanent elevation of the mean level of instruction of workers and consumers. This elevation was backed up by a rapid “massification” of secondary and, later, higher education. And the state was able to pay for it, because the economic growth sustained a parallel growth of fiscal incomes. The mean public expenses for education in Western Europe grew up, from 3% of the GNP (gross national product) in the 50’s, to about 6% at the end of the 70’s. The pace of that “massification” was tremendous : in France only 4% of one generation achieved the baccalaureate in 1946 ; 40 years later they were more than 60%.<sup>3</sup> In Belgium, the participation to education at the age-levels of 16-17 years grew up from 42% in 1956, to twice as much, 81%, in 1978.<sup>4</sup>

I have to insist on one point: it was really a “massification”, not a democratisation of the education. Children from all social classes reached a longer school career, but the relative social inequalities between them did not reduce. For example, in France the probability for children of white-collar workers to get a higher level of instruction than children of the working class was about 80% some 40 years ago ; but it was still 75% 30 years later. In 1951, 21% of the students in the prestigious “*Ecole Polytechnique*” were issued from the lower social classes. In 1989 they were only 8%.

This means that the “massification” of secondary education involved also a “massification” of the social selection. In the past, that selection happened before the entry into secondary school. Now it’s the education system itself that has to sort the children, officially according to their ability or their merit, but in fact often according to their social origin. In other words, the school becomes what Bourdieu called an “apparatus of social reproduction”.

---

<sup>3</sup> *INSEE-Première*, n° 488, september 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Van Haecht, *L'enseignement rénové, de l'origine à l'éclipse*, éditions de l'ULB, Brussels 1985.

## A new economic context

The conditions that had caused and authorized the “massification” of secondary and higher education changed dramatically with the international economic crisis that started at the mid 70’s. But policies have always a certain inertia. We have to wait until the end of the 80’s before the economical and political authorities became really aware of the new economic context and the new missions that it imposes on education.

Let’s explore the characteristics of that new economic environment.

The first point is the great instability of that environment. The accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge in a context of exacerbated competition induces an accelerated rate of technical and industrial innovation. Civil aviation needed 54 years to conquer 25% of its potential market. Television needed 26 years. The personal computer needed only 15 years, the mobile phone 13 years and Internet conquered a quarter of its potential market in less than 7 years. That implies steadily new production methods, new professions and new markets. Joined to the process of “globalisation”, it also means constant restructurations, delocalisations, closing of factories, creation of new services, etc. The pace of change is tremendous. The horizon of economic predictability is fading away steadily.

The second characteristic of the “new economy” is the evolution of the labour market. We do all know the great precariousness of employment, the lasting high levels of unemployment in Europe and all over the world. Everybody knows also the growing need for high skilled workforces in the area of new technologies: engineers, computer and network specialists, etc. But what is far less known, is the impressive numerical growth of very low skilled workforces. A study, published in the American Monthly Labour Review, about the expected job growth in the United States during the next ten years, shows that 56% of the fastest growing jobs (in number, not in percent) need only a “short-term on-the-job training”: retail salespersons, cashiers, truck drivers, general office clerks, personal care and home health aides, teacher assistants, janitors, cleaners, nursing aides, receptionists, information clerks, waiters, guards, hand packers and packagers, food counters, fountain and related workers, etc. On a total of 20 million expected job creations in the US, 5 million will need a bachelor-degree or a higher level, but 9 million will need only a short or moderate-term on-the-job training. We are not more in a period of general growth of the education-levels needed on the labour-market, as it was the case in the 50’s, the 60’s and the beginning of the 70’s. Now the labour-market is increasingly stretched, increasingly “dualised”.

Finally, the third characteristic of our economic environment – and that’s once again a consequence of the exacerbating competition – is the trend to reduce public expenditures in all sectors and to redirect those expenditures in function of the needs of business. As the European Round Table of Industrialists says, “We have to use the limited amount of public money as a catalyst to sustain and stimulate the activity of the private sector».<sup>5</sup>

To put it in a nutshell: instability and unpredictability of the economic, industrial and technological evolutions, “dualisation” of the labour market, unceasing crisis of the state-finances, those are the main factors that have determined, since the end of the 80’s, a profound revision of the education policies.

---

<sup>5</sup> ERT, *Construire les autoroutes de l’Information pour repenser l’Europe, Un message des utilisateurs industriels*, june 1994.

## The birth of a European education-policy

During more than 30 years, the European economic leaders have concentrated their attention on the quantitative development of education. They needed more skilled workforces, a better quantitative adaptation between the different forms of education and the needs of the labour market. Now, for more than ten years, a further “massification” of education is no longer required. Their demands are from now on concentrated on a qualitative adaptation of the education systems to the needs of industry and services.

At the European level, the turning point was 1989, when the ERT, the European Round Table of industrialists, one of the most powerful business lobbies in Europe, published its first report on education. It began with these words: “Education is a strategic issue in European Competitiveness”. But, asked the, ERT : “does our educational system properly prepare people to live and work in Europe (...), does it provide people with adequate new knowledge throughout their working life ?”. And the answer was : NO. Education is “inappropriate or outdated” said the ERT. “Industry’s influence on the curricula (...) has been weak” and teachers have “a poor understanding of the economic environment and the nature of business and profit making”<sup>6</sup>. The ERT stigmatises a European education tradition that “allows and even encourages its young individuals to take the liberty of pursuing “interesting”, not directly job-related, studies”. And the industry-lobby concludes : “The technical and industrial development of European industry clearly requires an accelerated revitalisation of education and its curricula”.<sup>7</sup>

The ERT will continue to publish further reports all along the 90’s, specifying it’s requests about the “renovation” of the European education systems.

Those demands were quickly welcomed. In 1992, article 126 of the Treaty of Maastricht granted for the first time the European Commission with some authority in the field of education. In its *White Paper on growth, competitiveness, and employment*, published in 1993, the Commission suggested that “the private sector, and businesses in particular, should become more involved in the work of vocational training systems. In order to facilitate this process, appropriate incentives (of a fiscal and legal nature) should be developed”.<sup>8</sup> At the DGXXII, Commissioner Edith Cresson initiated a Study Group on Education and Training, under direction of professor Jean-Louis Reiffers. This group took an active part in elaborating the European White Paper, “*Teaching and learning : towards the learning society*”, published in 1995. One year later, the Reiffers commission publishes it’s own conclusions in a voluminous report. The main idea of this report is: “It’s by adapting themselves to the character of the enterprise of the 21st century that the European education and training systems will be able to contribute to the European competitiveness”<sup>9</sup>. The Reiffers-commission only reproduced the demands of the ERT. And another year later, the European Commission reproduced in its turn the recommendations of the Reiffers-Commission in a new very important document : “*Towards a Europe of knowledge*”. In the mean time, European action programmes, called “Socrates”, “Lenoardo da Vinci”, “Youth” and “Tempus”, allowed those plans to firm up.

Edith Cresson started the job of creating a European common education policy. But it’s

---

<sup>6</sup> ERT, *Education and European competence en Europe*, Brussels, february 1989.

<sup>7</sup> ERT, *Education and European competence en Europe*, Brussels, february 1989.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, *The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century*, White Paper on growth, competitiveness, and employment, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Reiffers Commission, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training*, report of the study group on education and training, 1996

Viviane Reding, the new Luxemburger Commissioner for Education, which officialised the leading role of the European Commission in the field of Education. Firstly by organising, one year ago in Lisbon, a crucial summit on the question of *e-Learning*. Secondly, by publishing six months later its vision on Lifelong learning and, last but not least, by realising in January of this year, an important synthesis of the visions developed by the member states: “*The concrete future objectives of education systems*”.<sup>10</sup> This text makes at once clear what the aims of educational reforms are today: “the European Union is confronted with a quantum leap stemming from globalisation and the new knowledge-driven economy”. Thus, the strategic goal to which education has to collaborate is helping Europe “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth”. The leading role of the European Commission is also clearly put forward in this document: “no single Member State can now accomplish all this alone. Our societies, like our economies, are now too interdependent for this to be realistic. ».

What does it actually mean, to adapt education to the needs of business? Let’s recall the 3 main characteristics of the present economic environment : economical and technological instability, “dualisation” of the labour-market and budgetary problems of the states. What does that involve for education? Firstly that it’s not economically necessary to give a high level of education, of general knowledge, to all the future workers. It is possible and necessary to stop the “massification” movement, because that is from now on too expensive and no longer justified from an economic point of view.

For the majority of future workers, education should not transmit a broad common culture, but teach them some basic, general skills, that can be easily put into practice in a fast changing environment. They also have to learn to adapt their knowledge and their skills all along their working life. To transform the aims of education, the easiest way is to make the education system itself more flexible. The public school system has to be transformed into a competitive education-market where everybody will find an education that is exactly suited to its social destiny and its financial capacity. That is the European program.

## Long life learning

In 1997, the European council meeting in Amsterdam pointed that “priority should be given to the development of vocational and social skills to facilitate workers' adaptation to labour market developments”.<sup>11</sup> What obviously matters here are skills, not knowledge. “Knowledge, says Mrs Cresson, is nowadays, in our fast-moving societies and economies, a perishable product. What we learn today is outdated or even redundant tomorrow.”<sup>12</sup> And the European research centre on education, Euridyce, points that “knowledge evolves at such a rate that schools can only bring students the basis to develop their knowledge by themselves”<sup>13</sup>.

One of the general skills that are more and more frequently asked by the employers is the ability to work in an environment that is dominated by the new information and

---

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, *The concrete future objectives of education systems*, COM(2001) 59 final, Brussels, 31.01.2001

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, *Towards a Europe of knowledge*, Communication from the Commission, COM(97)563 final

<sup>12</sup> Edith Cresson, *Putting our knowledge to work: a second chance for young people*, speech at Harrogate, 5 March 1998.

<sup>13</sup> *Dix années de réformes au niveau de l'enseignement obligatoire dans l'union européenne (1984-1994)*, Euridyce.

communication technologies. “All Member States see a need to reconsider the basic skills with which young people should leave initial school or training, and for these to integrate fully the Information and Communication Technologies”<sup>14</sup> says the European commission. Don’t be mistaken by those words: it does NOT mean that they want to train vast masses of computer specialists. As we have already underlined, that is not necessary in a dualised labour-market. But all workers, even those who occupy precarious and low skilled jobs, have to be familiarized with a basic use of those technologies. For example, the thousands of people who will refill automatic dispensers of Coca Cola or some fast food will have to use automated guiding systems, on board of their truck, to optimise their productivity despite the bottlenecks in urban traffic. They also have to be able to learn, by themselves, how to use new software of that kind, because its evolution is very fast. That is the first reason why ERT and EC insist on the need of giving all young people those general ICT-skills.

Incidentally, that makes us understand how ICT are introduced in education today. There is little global reflection on the conditions of a positive, pedagogic use of those technologies. There is almost no serious training of the teachers (I do not mean training in the use of a computer, that’s easy, but training in it’s correct use as a didactic instrument, what’s far more difficult). Besides, there is no political will to give teachers the material conditions – in terms of class-size for example – to put into practice the pedagogic innovations that ICT could make possible. There is only one thing : investments in machines and Internet connections. Because the aim is simply to let young people get some practice in clicking a button, surfing a hypertext link or pointing a mouse. Nothing more.

Well, not exactly. There is one more purpose in introducing communication technologies at school. That is, as the European Commission says, “getting the innovation potential of the new technologies to work for the requirements of and quality in lifelong training »<sup>15</sup>. Lifelong learning is necessary in the eyes of the employers, but it could also be very costly. Training each year masses of workforces in the use of new technologies is too expensive. The ERT has found a solution to that problem: “In the learning society open-access to multimedia stations has to be seen as a priority. All learners should avail themselves of these new learning tools in the same way that they have television sets”. Consequently, the ERT “recommends that all European and national governments and education authorities should work actively towards stimulating the use of Internet and Intranet systems in the learning community”.<sup>16</sup> People will have to use Internet as the way to keep their knowledge and skills tuned with the needs of their employer. Of course, they will do so at home, during their week-ends or evenings, and they will buy their computer and pay their communications with their own money! That’s what the European commission calls “responsibilising” the workers in their long-life training. “People themselves are the leading actors of knowledge societies”, says de EC. “It is the human capacity to create and use knowledge effectively and intelligently, on a continually changing basis, that counts most. To develop this capacity to the full, people need to want and to be able to take their lives into their own hands”.<sup>17</sup> And the EC concludes: “Education and training throughout life is the best way for everyone to meet the challenge of change”. Well now, if you can’t get a good job, it’s your own entire fault!

---

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, *The concrete future objectives of education systems*, report from the commission, Brussels, 31.01.2001, COM(2001) 59 final

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, *e-Learning – Designing tomorrow's education*, communication from the commission COM(2000) 318 final, Brussels, 24.5.2000

<sup>16</sup> European Round Table, *Investing in Knowledge, The Integration of Technology in European Education*, 1997

<sup>17</sup> European Commission, *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels, 30.10.2000, SEC(2000) 1832

## Educating the consumers

The school has not only to train the workers; it should also educate the consumers. The development of new mass-markets in the area of emerging technologies is only possible if the potential clients have the necessary knowledge and skills to use those products, if they can overcome their apprehensions. That is, once again, a task for the school system. In 1997, the Reiffers-Commission wrote: "It is doubtful whether our continent will take its rightful place in this new market if our education and training systems do not rapidly respond to the challenge. The development of these technologies, in the context of strong international competition, requires that the effects of scale play their full part. If the world of education and training does not use IT, Europe will become a mass market too late"<sup>18</sup> Some months later, the European commissioner for education, Edith Cresson, declared at a meeting: "The European market (of ICT's) remains too narrow, too fragmented; the too small number of users and creators penalizes our industry (...) Thus it was necessary to take a number of initiatives to help it and to stimulate it. That's the purpose of the European action plan *Learning in the information society*"<sup>19</sup>.

Three years later, at the European summit in Lisbon, things became even more obvious. The central question at that summit was: "how could Europe catch up with the USA and Japan in the race for controlling the ICT-industry and electronic business?" And the answer was: "e-learning", massive introduction of computers and Internet in the schools.

Another way of using the education systems in the aim of stimulating markets, can be found in the development of schoolhouse commercialism: advertisements in schoolbooks, sponsoring of educational materials or activities, etc. In most of the European countries, those practices are forbidden by law, although they exist more and more. In 1998, the European Commission published a report on "marketing at school" (in fact it has been written on the Commission's demand by the private group GMV-Conseil, but the Commission publicizes that report). That report recommends to open education to the markets. I quote: "If there are no safeguards, the penetration of marketing into schools risks blunting pupils' discernment, making them frustrated, giving them an impoverished view of society and fostering stereotyped attitudes in them. However, with safeguards, these traps can be avoided, and advantages will appear: advantages in terms of resources, of course, for school systems with a chronic lack of resources, but also in educational terms because the penetration of marketing into schools opens them up to the world of business and to the realities of life and society and provides opportunities to educate children about consumer affairs in general and advertising techniques in particular. (...) In order to make it possible for schools to derive maximum financial and educational benefit from marketing measures in schools and to prevent an "American-type downward spiral", the study recommends (...) keeping up the pressure on businesses to continue to produce good-quality materials on the basis of the criteria set out above; urging the national education authorities to update the texts on "commercial practices" in the light of the increase in the number of new media. These texts should now recognise that certain "good" practices that are already in widespread use are legitimate, which would make the texts that much more credible in banning less reputable practices".<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Reiffers Commission, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training*, report of the study group on education and training, 1996

<sup>19</sup> Edith Cresson, *Intervention à la Conférence de lancement du programme européen Leonardo da Vinci sur la formation professionnelle*, Tours, 3 mars 1995, SPEECH/95/21 (Rapid).

<sup>20</sup> GMV Conseil, *Marketing in schools*, study on commercial practices in schools conducted at the request of the European Commission, October 1998

## Deregulation

Now that it's clear, in the light of what has just been said, what the school has to do – to train flexible workforces and flexible consumers – the next question is : how ? And once again, the answer is: flexibility. Not only the worker has to be able to adapt to a changing environment. So does the school itself.

In 1989, the European Round Table wrote that “administrative practices are often too rigid to allow education institutions at various levels to adapt to the changes made imperative by rapidly developing modern technology and the restructuring of industry and services ». <sup>21</sup> In another report, six years later, the ERT regrets that “in most of the European countries, schools are integrated in a centralised public system, controlled by a bureaucracy that slows down their evolution and makes them not permeable to the demands coming from outside”. <sup>22</sup> The European Commission has perfectly well heard the advocacy of the ERT. Since 1995, it has asserted, “the central question now is how to move towards greater flexibility in education and training systems”<sup>23</sup>.

And indeed, the education systems of all European countries have followed a similar evolution towards more autonomy, more competition. In its reports, the European study centre Eurydice emphasises the international character of that movement towards deregulation, decentralisation, autonomy, etc. <sup>24</sup>

The main idea is clear: to dismantle the public school systems, directed by the states, and substitute them by a network of autonomous schools, engaged in a severe competition. Indeed “the most decentralised systems, says the Commission, are also the most flexible, the quickest to adapt and hence have the greatest propensity to develop new forms of partnership ». <sup>25</sup> Autonomous schools are more flexible; and competition will force them to adapt to the changing demands of the environment. That's the main idea.

For example, autonomous schools are more likely to engage partnerships with private enterprises. One of the aims of those partnerships is to instil some “spirit of competition” into the world of education. Given that European education systems are traditionally reticent to developing links with the world of enterprise, the European commission stated that “the education systems should review their practice to see what can be learned from [partnerships with business] in terms of motivating learners and of injecting a new perspective into schools or training establishments”. Schools should also “build on the contacts they have with businesses in their local environment to provide role models of successful businesses as part of their civic education curricula”. <sup>26</sup>

Finally, deregulating the education system also results in breaking the national diplomas and degrees, as the traditional way to regulate the labour market. Instead, the economic leaders

---

<sup>21</sup> ERT, *Education and European competence en Europe*, Brussels, february 1989.

<sup>22</sup> ERT, *Les marchés du travail en Europe Les perspectives de création d'emplois dans la deuxième moitié des années 90*, Bruxelles 1993.

<sup>23</sup> . European Commission, *Teaching and learning, Towards the learning society, whitepaper on education and training*, Brussels 1995

<sup>24</sup> *Dix années de réformes au niveau de l'enseignement obligatoire dans l'union européenne (1984-1994)*, Eurydice.

<sup>25</sup> . European Commission, *Teaching and learning, Towards the learning society, white paper on education and training*, Brussels 1995

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, *The concrete future objectives of education systems*, report from the commission, Brussels, 31.01.2001, COM(2001) 59 final

demand modular certificates for partial skills. They allow a more flexible, and thus less costly, labour market. This goes hand in hand with the attempt at making the “learner” more “responsible”, namely by forcing him to choose those apprenticeships that are really important for the labour market, hence for the employers. Under the leadership of Edith Cresson, the European Commission has planned a European skill’s Card that would in time replace all European degrees and open the frontiers to a greater competition, both on the labour market and on the educational market.

## Education Business

The deregulation of the school and the march towards lifelong learning both open the door to the privatisation of the school. Following the OECD, “the economic, political and cultural globalisation makes obsolete the locally established institution that is anchored in a determined culture, that we call the school, as well as it makes obsolete the teacher”<sup>27</sup>. The European politicians are even more explicit : “the era of school-based education is coming to a close. This will liberate educational process and will place more control in the hands of those providers that are more innovative than traditional educational structures”.<sup>28</sup> Of course, everybody has understood who are those “more innovative” providers...

The 2000 billion dollars of worldwide annual expenses in education are indeed immensely attractive for capitalists who have difficulties in finding profitable placements, especially in the long time. For them, the opening of education to free market is like a New Eldorado. Maybe even the last one!

The American consulting group Eduventures writes that the 1990’s “will be remembered as a time when the for-profit education industry came of age. The foundations for a vibrant 21st century education industry – entrepreneurship, technology innovations and market opportunities – began to coalesce and achieve critical mass ».<sup>29</sup>

Following the analyses of Merrill Lynch the situation is ripe for a vast for-profit privatisation of education. In this country, the society Capital Strategies has launched the “UK Education and training index”, that has grown 240% between 1996 and 2000, while the general FTSE-index grew “only” 65%.<sup>30</sup> As main factors explaining this growth, Capital Strategies indicates the growing public investments in new technologies for education, the fast development of partnerships between universities and industry and the trend to growing outplacement of educational services. But one of the most powerful catalysts of the development of for-profit education is, of course, Internet. Because this technology allows distributing educational services worldwide, without any marginal costs (once the investments in scientific research, pedagogical, artistic and technological development, are done, the product can be distributed as many times as possible, without any extra costs).

So Internet opens a vast new educational market, but it has to be a world market to be really profitable. That’s one of the reasons why the World Trade Organisation hoped to free up the world market of educational services at the Millenium Round in Seattle. As you know, they did not succeed immediately, because of the strong protests of the “civil society”. But the

---

<sup>27</sup> OCDE, *Analyse des politiques d’éducation*, Paris 1998.

<sup>28</sup> Reiffers Commission, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training*, report of the study group on education and training, 1996

<sup>29</sup> Adam Newman, *What is the education-industry ?*, Eduventures, january 2000.

<sup>30</sup> *Capital Strategies, News Release*, 18 juillet 2000.

discussions are going on, in Geneva, far away from the camera's and from the protesters. And the European Commission, who negotiates at the WTO in the name of all the member states has clearly said that it was demanding a further liberalization of the international education-market.

## Conclusions

The results of the actual education policy are twofold. On the one hand, the deregulation and privatisation of the education system will contribute to a greater social inequality at school. Deregulation and autonomy, in a context of strong social differentiation, are a basis of unequal development. We will have, even more than nowadays, schools for the rich and schools for the poor. Private education for those who can afford it, while, following the OECD, the public schools will only have to “ensure access to apprenticeship of those who will never constitute a profitable market and whose exclusion from the society will grow while others continue to progress”<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, the programs of those schools – and I mean especially the public schools for children of the lower classes – will be dominated by the flexible, all-purpose, competences, required by the labour market. And it will be so to the detriment of the general knowledge, the common culture, that could give those future workers the arms they need to understand the world they live in and to take part in the transformation of that world towards more justice, more equity, more rationality. The transition from the era of “massification” to the era of “merchandisation”, will prevent masses of people from accessing a high level tertiary education. For a few years, the participation to tertiary education has indeed reduced in many European countries. It stagnates elsewhere.

But for many, the current process will also mean a regression in the quality of basic, compulsory instruction. That does not seem to be a problem for the economic leaders of modern capitalism. They know very well that the markets do not need too many qualified workforces. And they also know that reducing the quality of education is, politically, the easiest way to reduce state expenses for that education. As a document of the OECD pointed in 1996, “If operating expenditure is trimmed, the quantity of service should not be reduced, even if the quality has to suffer. For example, operating credits for schools or universities may be reduced, but it would be dangerous to restrict the number of students. Families will react violently if children are refused admission, but not to a gradual reduction in the quality of the education given, and the school can progressively and for particular purposes obtain a contribution from the families, or eliminate a given activity. This should be done case by case, in one school but not in the neighbouring establishment, so that any general discontent of the population is avoided”.<sup>32</sup>

Is that lucidity or cynism? It's up to you...

*Nico Hirtt*

*May 2001*

[nico.hirtt@skynet.be](mailto:nico.hirtt@skynet.be)

Visit the Web-site of the “Appel pour une école démocratique” :

---

<sup>31</sup> *Adult learning and Technology in OECD Countries*, OECD Proceedings, Paris 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Morrisson Christian, *The Political Feasibility of Adjustment*, OECD, Policy Brief nr 13, 1996.

<http://users.skynet.be/aped>