

**Leonard Orban**

European Commissioner responsible for multilingualism

## **"Multilingualism and Competitiveness"**

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

EP - ALDE European summer school "Different Shades of Liberal and Democrat Parties"

**Brussels, 5 July 2007**

Dear participants of the ALDE European Summer School,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

About half a year into my new mandate, I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the ALDE European Summer School on different shades of Liberal and Democrat policies and this debate on globalisation and the economy. I will particularly focus on how languages and learning languages can contribute to the competitiveness of the European economy in a globalised world.

There are several benefits of multilingualism in the context of competitiveness, employment and growth. I would like to start by sharing with you some facts and figures that have recently been published.

As you all know, the promotion of competitiveness is an important element of the Lisbon Strategy and encouraging young people, like you, to become more entrepreneurial is a key action of the European Youth Pact. For these reasons, the new generation of Community programmes, such as Life Long Learning has been designed to promote multilingualism and competitiveness at a very practical level.

Evidence shows that the multilingualism dimension of competitiveness cannot be exaggerated.

We have research showing the reasons why companies are not active on foreign markets - why they simply don't market their products abroad. The results of the study show that poor language skills constitute a major obstacle to small and medium sized companies trying to sell their products in other countries.

Taking a closer look at this question of language skills, the Commission asked a research organisation to try to find out how small businesses in Europe could increase their exports by developing a more positive approach to multilingual communication. The findings of the Study suggest that there is an enormous potential for small businesses in Europe to increase their exports if they invest more in language learning and develop more competitive language strategies.

Across the sample of nearly 2000 exporting businesses, 11 % of the respondents told us they had lost at least one business deal as a result of poor language skills.

Europe's 23 million small and medium-sized enterprises provide 67 % of total private employment, which corresponds to some 75 million jobs. Even a marginal improvement in export performances would have a huge impact on growth and jobs across the European Union.

The study also showed that even though English is still the first language of international business, there is an ever increasing demand for other languages, like German, Spanish, Russian etc. Because of globalisation many larger companies stressed the need for non-European languages such as Chinese, Arabic and Urdu, as they seek to expand into non-European markets.

Instead of investing in language training themselves, small and medium sized companies tend to look to the education systems of the Member States to provide them with the language skills they need. The report however shows that these approaches cannot solve the problem without further action.

That is why it is time to have a debate on the issues of multilingualism and competitiveness, both within the Member States and at a European level. We need to ensure that the education systems in the Member States, produce school graduates with the language skills that will allow you to benefit fully from all kinds of employment and trade opportunities.

Almost three-quarters of respondents to a survey on languages in the EU identified 'improving job opportunities' as the main reason why young people should learn languages. What's more, already 40% of young people, the 15-24 year olds know at least two languages as well as their mother tongue, which is double the rate for those that are over 55.

The European Commission wants its citizens to be able to take up opportunities to work and study in all four corners of the World. You all know the Erasmus programme. Findings show a strong correlation between spending a period of study in another country and success on the labour market later.

In the new Lifelong Learning Programme, into which Erasmus has been merged, we have increased the opportunities for young people in vocational education and training to spend a study period abroad.

Let me tell you; there is a good chance that Erasmus could be complemented by a mobility programme for young entrepreneurs, enhancing competitiveness! In fact, the Commission has allocated funding of 1 million € this year to explore this proposal further and to test some pilot projects, which we hope will result in young people spending more time in a foreign country.

I am also exploring ways of improving languages among young people, and companies so that they can become more competitive. After the summer holidays, on the 21st of September I have organised a conference on multilingualism and business to explore this challenge. Issues that will be brought up at the forum are, among other things, how languages can contribute to regional development. The conference will also investigate the supply and demand of language skills in companies and make them meet at least in a short term perspective. I will also stress the importance of education institutes and human resources managers and the vital link between the two. Finally I hope to promote language learning in companies, by launching alternative learning methods of enhancing internal language skills. The main objective of this meeting will be to raise awareness of the important connection between language skills and improving competitiveness.

Dear participants, let me round up by pointing out that the challenges related to a further integration of the Union continue to evolve. Whereas in the 1990s we concentrated on completing the internal market, today the issues are how to empower civil society, and how to ensure that our citizens can make full use of the opportunities that globalisation brings. And I certainly hope the Union will be able to show you that multilingualism and language skills are very important assets in meeting these challenges.

Thank you for your attention.