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from: Secretary-General of the European Commission,  
signed by Mr Jordi AYET PUIGARNAU, Director

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to: Mr Pierre de BOISSIEU, Secretary-General of the Council of the European  
Union

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Subject: Commission communication on early childhood education and care: providing  
all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow

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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION**

**Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for  
the world of tomorrow**

## COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION

### Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Europe's future will be based on smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems across the EU is essential to all three growth dimensions. In this context, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. Complementing the central role of the family, ECEC has a profound and long-lasting impact which measures taken at a later stage cannot achieve. Children's earliest experiences form the basis for all subsequent learning. If solid foundations are laid in the early years, later learning is more effective and is more likely to continue life-long, lessening the risk of early school leaving, increasing the equity of educational outcomes and reducing the costs for society in terms of lost talent and of public spending on social, health and even justice systems.<sup>1</sup>

The flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move' as part of the EU's overarching Europe 2020 Strategy highlights the role of creativity and innovation for our competitiveness and for the preservation of our standards of living in the longer term. Against this background, it underlines that we must offer *all* our young people the chance to develop their talents to the fullest possible extent. ECEC has the potential to give all young people a good start in the world of tomorrow and to break the cycle which transmits disadvantage from one generation to another.

The benefits of high-quality ECEC are wide-ranging: social, economic and educational. ECEC has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved competences of future EU citizens, enabling us to meet the medium- and long-term challenge, and to create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change as set out in the flagship 'Agenda for new skills and jobs'<sup>2</sup>. There is clear evidence that participation in high quality ECEC leads to significantly better attainment in international tests on basic skills, such as PISA and PIRLS, equivalent to between one and two school years of progress.<sup>3</sup>

High quality ECEC enables parents better to reconcile family and work responsibilities, so boosting employability. ECEC supports children, not only in their future education but also in their integration into society, generating well-being, and contributing to their employability when they become adults.<sup>4</sup>

ECEC is also particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged, including those from migrant and low-income backgrounds. It can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction,

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<sup>1</sup> Commission Communication 'Efficiency and Equity in Education and Training Systems' (COM (2006) 481)

<sup>2</sup> Commission Communication 'An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment' (COM(2010)682)

<sup>3</sup> OECD *PISA 2009 results Vol.2: Overcoming Social Background* (2010) pp 97-8; IEA, *PIRLS 2006 International Report*, (2007) p. 158

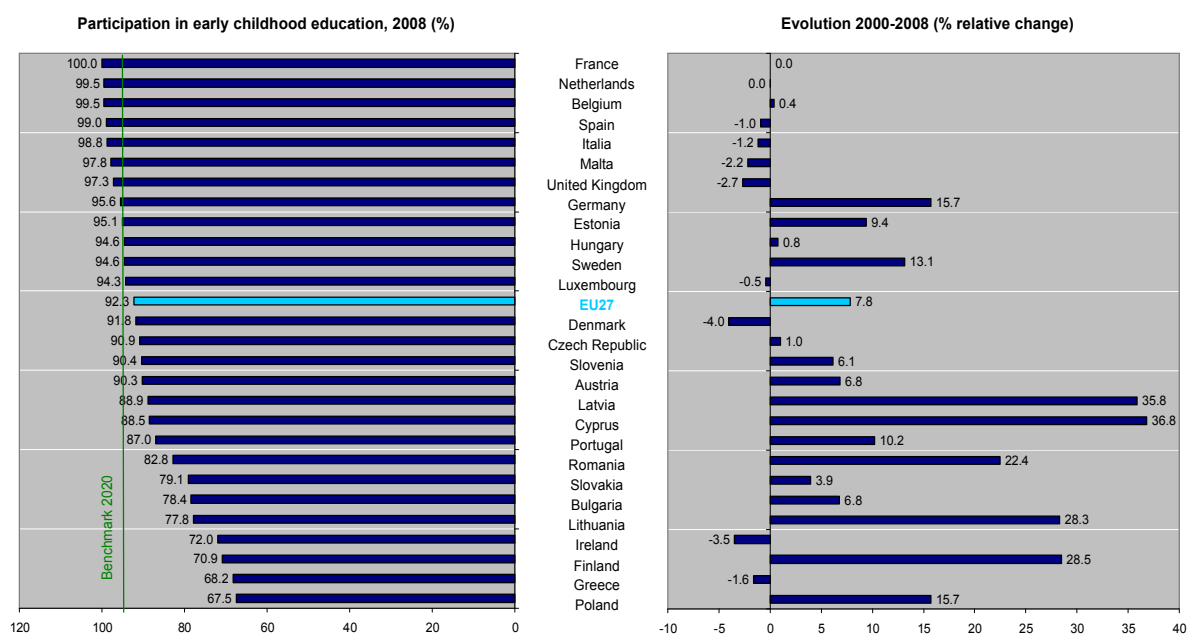
<sup>4</sup> Council Conclusions of 26.11.2009 on the education of children with a migrant background (OJ 2009/C 301/07)

and so contribute to achieving the goals of the Europe 2020 flagship initiative European Platform against Poverty.<sup>5</sup>

High quality early childhood education and care can make a strong contribution - through enabling and empowering all children to realise their potential - to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets in particular: reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

### Current situation and the role of the EU

Up to now, the focus of most EU level action has been on increasing the quantity of childcare and pre-primary places to enable more parents, especially mothers, to join the labour market. At the 2002 Barcelona European Council Member States agreed by 2010 to provide full-day places in formal childcare arrangements to at least 90% of children aged between three and compulsory school age, and to at least 33% of children under three. Progress has been uneven. For 0-3 year olds, five countries have exceeded the 33% target, and five others are approaching it, but the majority is falling behind, with eight achieving only 10% or less.<sup>6</sup> For the over 3 year olds, eight countries have exceeded the 90% target and three others are approaching it, but coverage is below 70% in close to one third of the Member States. In 2009, Education Ministers reinforced this approach by setting a new European benchmark for at least 95% of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education to participate in ECEC by 2020. As the following chart shows, the current EU average is 92.3% with a significant number of countries lagging far behind.



Source: DG EAC – Data source: Eurostat – UOE<sup>7</sup>

There remains therefore an important challenge to extend coverage of pre-school provision. But the quality of ECEC must also be high. Member States have therefore in recent years stated their wish to cooperate more closely at EU level on issues relating to increasing the

<sup>5</sup> Council Conclusions of 11.05.2010 on the social dimension of education and training (OJ 2010/C 135/02)

<sup>6</sup> Commission Staff Working Document ‘Implementation of the Barcelona objectives concerning childcare facilities for pre-school age children’ (SEC (2008) 2524)

<sup>7</sup> For the United Kingdom there is a break in series between 2002 and 2003 (earlier figures are overestimated). For Greece 2008 is replaced by 2007 data.

quality of ECEC. In 2006, Ministers stated that ECEC can bring the highest rates of return over the lifelong learning cycle, especially for the disadvantaged.<sup>8</sup> In 2008 they agreed a series of priorities for cooperation at EU level on school policy issues, including how to ensure accessible, high-quality pre-school provision,<sup>9</sup> and in 2009 they adopted a strategic framework for cooperation in education and training until 2020, which included among the priorities for the period 2009-2011 'to promote generalised equitable access and reinforce the quality of the provision and teacher support' in pre-primary education'.<sup>10</sup>

Given its role in reducing early school leaving and promoting social inclusion in education, ECEC will form part of Member States' strategies to address the Europe 2020 priorities. Many Member States are intensifying their efforts to examine and reform their entire ECEC systems, starting from very different positions in relation to enrolment rates, supply, quality, resources, conception and governance of ECEC.

While this is an area which essentially falls under the responsibility of the Member States, there is considerable scope for the EU to add value to this process, by facilitating the identification and exchange of good practice, by encouraging the development of infrastructure and capacity in ECEC, and by supporting EU-wide research into different aspects of ECEC quality and impact.

This Communication responds to the requests from Member States to launch a process of cooperation which will help them address the two-fold challenge outlined above: to provide **access to child care and education** for all, but also **to raise the quality of their provision** through well integrated services that build on a joint vision of the role of ECEC, of the most effective **curricular frameworks** and of the **staff competences** and **governance arrangements** necessary to deliver it.

Examples of some of the best practice in the world in ECEC can already be found within EU Member States. The Commission intends to use the open method of coordination to help Member States identify, analyse and spread effective policy approaches in ECEC and transfer them to their own contexts. It will use existing instruments such as the Lifelong Learning Programme and the Structural Funds to support innovation, staff development and infrastructure in ECEC. It will also use the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Development, to support research, analysis and the development of evidence on the most effective approaches to ECEC in the EU and elsewhere.

## **2 ACCESS TO ECEC**

### **2.1 Universal and inclusive ECEC**

Access to universally available, high-quality inclusive ECEC services is beneficial for all. It not only helps children to unlock their potential but can also contribute to engaging parents and other family members with related measures to improve employment, job-related training, parent education, and leisure-time activities.

Early childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage. Research shows that poverty and family dysfunction have the strongest correlation with poor educational outcomes. There are already big differences in cognitive, social and emotional development between children from rich

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<sup>8</sup> Council Conclusions on efficiency and equity in education and training (OJ C 298 of 8.12.2006)

<sup>9</sup> Council Conclusions on preparing young people for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools (OJ C 319 of 13.12.2008)

<sup>10</sup> Council conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') (OJ C 119 of 28.5.2009)

and poor backgrounds at the age of 3, and, if not specifically addressed, this gap tends to widen by the age of 5. Research from the USA shows that the beneficial impact of ECEC on children from poor families is twice as high as for those with a more advantaged background.<sup>11</sup> ECEC is therefore particularly beneficial for socially disadvantaged children and their families, including migrants and minorities.<sup>12</sup> But the benefits of ECEC extend far up the income ladder beyond poverty, and for all social groups it can help address a number of educational problems in a more lasting and cost-efficient way than later interventions.<sup>13</sup>

ECEC is an important way to reduce the incidence of early school leaving, which is strongly correlated with socio-economic disadvantage. Universally available high-quality ECEC can close the gap in social development and numeracy and literacy achievement between children from socially advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, and so break the cycle of low achievement and disengagement that often leads to school drop-out and so to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next.<sup>14</sup>

For the children of migrant families, the data show that, overall, compared with pupils from native backgrounds, there is large gap in achievement levels, that the performance of the second generation is lower than the first in many Member States, and that rates of early school leaving are on average twice as high.<sup>15</sup> Migrant families are often unfamiliar both with the language and with the educational system of the host country, so supporting their children's learning can pose a particular challenge. There is strong evidence that participation in ECEC programmes can be highly beneficial for migrant children's cognitive and linguistic development. Model programmes in the USA have shown significant positive effects in terms of later educational success and income, but also in terms of criminal behaviour.<sup>16</sup> Providing early language assistance to children with a different home language is an important part of improving their school-readiness and allowing them to start on an equal footing with their peers.

The situation of the Roma minority, for example, is often more difficult, and most Member States face a systemic challenge to provide suitable educational opportunities for Roma children. Although their needs for support are greater, participation rates of Roma children in ECEC are generally significantly lower than for the native population, and expanding these opportunities is a key policy challenge across the EU. ECEC can play a key role in overcoming the educational disadvantage faced by Roma children, as highlighted by pilot actions on Roma inclusion currently underway in some Member States with contributions from the EU budget.<sup>17</sup>

In respect of children with special needs, Member States have committed themselves, through adherence to the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, to inclusive education approaches.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, some 2% of the European school population remains in segregated settings. ECEC offers potential for greater inclusion of children with special education needs, paving the way for their later integration in mainstream schools.

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<sup>11</sup> S.W. Barnett, 'Maximising returns from prekindergarten education', (2004) p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> J. Bennett, 'Benchmarks for early childhood services in OECD countries', Innocenti Working Paper (2008), p. 23; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Poorer children's educational attainment' (2010).

<sup>13</sup> S.W. Barnett, 'Benefits and costs of quality per-school education: evidence based-policy to improve returns'. Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> OECD ECEC Network meeting, (2010), p.11.

<sup>14</sup> Commission Staff Working Document, 'Reducing early school leaving' (SEC(2011)96), p.15.

<sup>15</sup> Council Conclusions on the education of children with a migrant background (OJ C 301 of 31.12.2009)

<sup>16</sup> D. Nusche, 'What works in migrant education?', OECD Education Working Paper No.22 (2009) p.27

<sup>17</sup> Further details: [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/themes/roma/about\\_en.cfm?nmenu=2](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/themes/roma/about_en.cfm?nmenu=2)

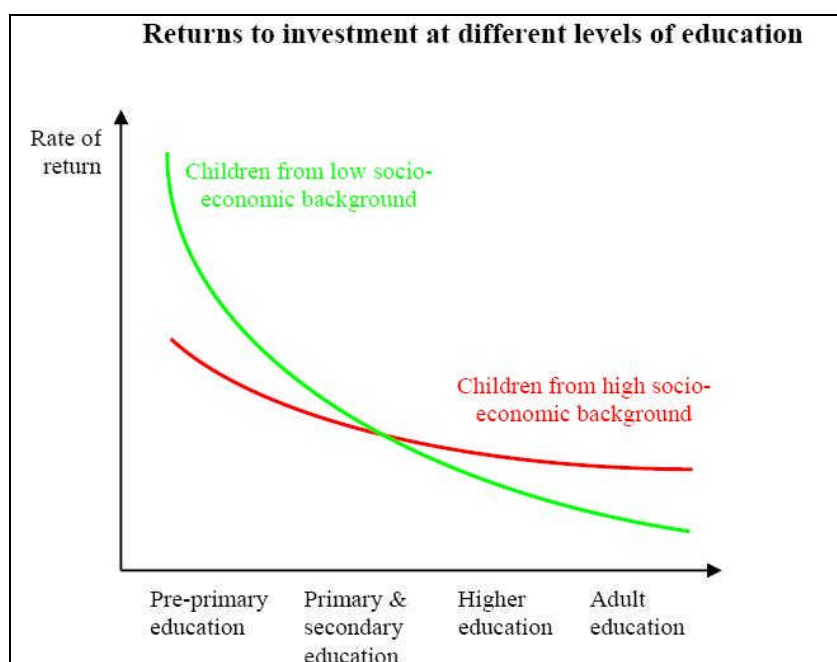
<sup>18</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) has been signed by all Member States, and ratified by most.

Realizing the potential of ECEC to address the inclusion challenges outlined above depends on the design and funding of the ECEC system. There is clear evidence that universal access to quality ECEC is more beneficial than interventions targeted exclusively at vulnerable groups. Targeting ECEC poses problems because it is difficult in practice to identify the target group reliably, it tends to stigmatise its beneficiaries and can even lead to segregation at later stages of education. Targeted services are also more at risk of cancellation than universal ones.

It is important to bear in mind that ECEC services, however good, can only compensate partially for family poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. To increase the long-term benefits of high-quality ECEC for the children from a disadvantaged background, ECEC must be linked to initiatives in other policy areas in a comprehensive strategy (employment, housing, health, etc.).

## 2.2 Efficient and equitable funding

As the following chart shows, returns on investment in early childhood education are the highest, and particularly for those from a disadvantaged background, while educational investment at later stages tends disproportionately to benefit children from higher socio-economic backgrounds.



Source: COM (2006) 481, p.4.

Unit costs per child in ECEC can be at least as expensive as in school, particularly if the services are of high-quality, but research shows that high-quality ECEC can improve the cost/benefit ratio. In other words, higher investment in early childhood can *save* money later.<sup>19</sup> However, in most Member States, public spending on education per child in the early childhood phase is lower than in any other phase.<sup>20</sup>

There is a great variety of financing models for ECEC in Member States, based on public and private sources. All European countries finance or co-finance ECEC provision for over 3 year

<sup>19</sup> M.E. Lamb, 'Nonparental child care: context, quality, correlates and consequences', in W. Damon et al, *Handbook of Child Psychology* (1998)

<sup>20</sup> OECD, *Doing better for children* (2009), p.15.

olds from public sources; less than half of EU Member States cover most of the costs without requiring family contributions. For the under-threes, provision tends to be privately funded. Some Member States offer additional financial assistance, additional staffing, and financial incentives for staff retention for the provision of services to at-risk groups.

Given Member States' increased policy attention on ECEC, and the consequences of restrictions on public spending, there is a strong need to ensure that funding is used in the most efficient way.

Market-based services have the potential to limit public expenditure and allow greater choice and control for parents; however this should not be allowed to restrict the availability of high quality services for all. Low-income families tend to have the greatest need for childcare early and at the lowest possible cost, but often cannot afford market-based ECEC services for their children.

### **3. QUALITY OF ECEC**

#### **3.1 Curriculum**

ECEC services should be designed and delivered to meet all children's full range of needs, cognitive, emotional, social and physical. These needs are very different from those of older, school-age children. Research indicates that the first years are the most formative in children's lives. The foundations of their main habits and patterns for their entire lives are established at this stage.

Acquiring non-cognitive skills (such as perseverance, motivation, ability to interact with others) in early years is essential for all future learning and successful social engagement, so the content of the ECEC curriculum should extend beyond cognitive learning, and encompass socialisation and a range of non-cognitive aspects. Integration between care and education is therefore necessary, irrespective of whether the ECEC system is split between (a) childcare from birth to age 3 and (b) pre-school education from 3 to the start of school, or is based on a unitary model covering the entire age range from birth to the start of compulsory schooling.<sup>21</sup>

Given the wide range of approaches that currently exist across the EU, it is important to focus on the issue of curricular quality and appropriateness, and to analyse and learn from good experiences in Member States, in order to secure the greatest positive impact of ECEC.

#### **3.2 Staff**

Staff competences are key to high quality ECEC. Attracting, educating, and retaining suitably qualified staff is a great challenge. Trends in the integration of childcare and education are increasing the professionalisation of staff working in ECEC services, including higher and a broader range of required levels of education, higher salaries, better working conditions, but the overall staff profile remains very diverse. There is still a tendency to allocate 'educational' work to qualified staff, and 'care' to less qualified staff, which often leads to a lack of continuity in the individual child's care and education.

Moreover, the range of issues tackled by ECEC staff and the diversity of the children in their charge requires continuous reflection on pedagogical practice as well as a systemic approach to professionalisation. In many countries, training for working with children at risk is an integral part of initial training, but many other aspects of diversity are not sufficiently covered. In addition, ECEC staff rarely have the same possibilities for induction, in-service training and continuous professional development as are available to school teachers.

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<sup>21</sup> Eurydice Report, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities* (2009), p. 29.



So while there has been progress in many Member States towards more professionalised and specialised staffing of ECEC, this starts from a low base in many countries and improving this situation will be an important part of any expansion of ECEC services.

There is a very important issue of gender balance among ECEC staff. Almost all of them are women. This has been a matter of concern for a long time. A few countries have set targets for the recruitment of men into ECEC or sought to redesign the profession to reduce gendering.<sup>22</sup> There is a pressing need to make a career in the ECEC sector more attractive to men in all EU countries.

### **3.3 Governance of ECEC**

The benefits of quality ECEC accrue in the long-term, which means that the rest of the system needs to build on them so that the good start is not lost.

A systemic approach to the ECEC services means strong collaboration between the different policy sectors, such as education, employment, health, social policy. Such approaches allow governments to organise and manage policies more simply and efficiently, and to combine resources for children and their families. This requires a coherent vision that is shared by all stakeholders, including parents, a common policy framework with consistent goals across the system, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities at central and local levels. This approach also helps ECEC services to respond better to local needs. Policy exchange and cooperation at EU level can help countries learn from each others' good practice in this important and challenging task.

The smooth passage from one institution to another (eg pre-primary to primary school) requires efficient communication between the institutions as well as continuity in terms of content and standards. In addition, the growing social diversity in the EU and the challenge of accommodating increasingly different socio-cultural contexts make transitions from the family to ECEC, and between different age groups within the same institution, increasingly important.

Quality assurance mechanisms for ECEC normally need to be based on an agreed pedagogical framework, covering the whole period between birth and compulsory school age. Such frameworks are broader than a traditional curriculum. They can define the competence requirements of staff, pedagogical orientations and standards, and the regulatory framework for early childhood services. They can also set out the outcomes aimed for, which can help the monitoring of the child's development in collaboration with parents and ECEC staff and ease his/her progress into further stages of education. The frameworks can set consistent standards throughout the system against which outcomes can be measured and quality assurance arrangements implemented.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This Communication has highlighted the need to improve ECEC across the EU by complementing the existing quantitative targets with measures to improve access and to ensure the quality of provision. In response to requests in the Council Conclusions of 2008 and 2009 for more policy cooperation on ECEC issues and to the challenge of the new European benchmark on ECEC participation, it proposes an agenda for work among Member States on key issues related to access and to quality, supported by actions by the Commission. This agenda is summarised in the boxes below. This work would be organised under the Open

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<sup>22</sup> OECD, *Starting strong II* (2006), pp. 170-1.

Method of Coordination and focus on the identification and analysis of common challenges, good practice models, and how to transfer successful approaches to other systems.

ECEC has an important role to play in reducing early school leaving, and so key challenges as well as possible solutions in this field should be highlighted in Member States' National Reform Programmes to address the Europe 2020 priorities. The need to learn from good practice and experience across the EU, and so improve the quality of policy in ECEC, is pressing.

## **Proposed issues for policy cooperation among Member States**

### **Access to ECEC**

- Using ECEC effectively to support inclusion and to reduce early school leaving
- Widening access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged children, migrants, Roma children (such as incentives for participation for disadvantaged families, adapting provision to the needs of families and increasing accessibility and affordability)
- Collecting evidence on the advantages and impact of universal versus targeted provision
- Designing efficient funding models and the right balance of public and private investment

### **Quality of ECEC**

- Finding the appropriate balance in the curriculum between cognitive and non-cognitive elements
- Promoting the professionalisation of ECEC staff: what qualifications are needed for which functions
- Developing policies to attract, educate and retain suitably qualified staff to ECEC
- Improving the gender balance of ECEC staff
- Moving towards ECEC systems which integrate care and education, and improve quality, equity and system efficiency
- Facilitating the transition of young children between family and education/care, and between levels of education
- Ensuring quality assurance: designing coherent, well-coordinated pedagogical frameworks, involving key stakeholders

### **In support, the Commission will:**

- Promote the identification and exchange of good policies and practices through the Open Method of Coordination on Education and Training with Member States (*ET2020*)
- Support the development of innovative approaches by developing transnational projects and networks under the Lifelong Learning Programme
- Provide support for research into these areas under the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme on Research and Development
- Encourage Member States to invest in these areas through the Structural Funds, in particular through support for the training of staff and for the development of accessible infrastructure
-