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Towards a knowledge-based Europe

The European Union and the information society

The Internet is changing the world we live in, and the challenge for Europe is to embrace the digital age and become a truly knowledge-based economy. The way in which the European Union manages this transition will help determine our quality of life, our working conditions and the overall competitiveness of our industries and services.

"eEurope" is the EU's scheme for guiding this process of change and for modernising our education and vocational training systems to ensure digital literacy at school and in the workplace.

eEurope and the related education strategy have become the driving force behind the EU's push to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010.

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The Internet is changing the world we live in. It is a change no less significant than the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. Over the last two decades, information technologies and the Internet have been transforming the way companies do business, the way students learn, the way scientists carry out research and the way in which governments provide services to their citizens.

Digital technologies have proved to be a powerful engine for economic growth and competitiveness. In the 1990s, businesses and consumers in the United States were quick to take advantage of this "digital revolution". As a result, American businesses became much more competitive and the US economy enjoyed spectacular and unprecedented growth.

At the Lisbon Summit in March 2000, European heads of state and government recognised that Europe too must become a much more digital economy. Indeed, they set a new goal for the European Union - to become the most competitive knowledge-based society in the world by 2010.

The EU's success in achieving this goal will help determine the quality of life of its citizens, the working conditions of its workers and the overall competitiveness of its industries and services.

Time for action

Already in November 1999, the European Commission put forward its **"eEurope"** initiative precisely to manage this transition, both within the Union and in the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

eEurope aims to ensure that everyone in the European Union – every citizen, every school, every company, every administration – has access to the new information and communication technologies and exploits them as fully as possible. That means, for example, using the Internet for a host of everyday activities, services and products such as education, government, health, culture and entertainment.

So *e*Europe is not only about making European industry more competitive: it is also about ensuring that all European citizens, especially those with special needs, have access to modern communications technologies to improve their quality of life.

They must have direct and interactive online access to knowledge, education, training, government, health services, culture and entertainment, financial services and much more. In today's society, Internet access has become a fundamental right for all citizens and responsible governments have a duty to provide it.

Putting the European stamp on the Internet

By boosting economic growth, information and communication technologies have great potential for creating new and better jobs, and generating greater prosperity. European governments want to ensure that these benefits are available to all – not just to a privileged minority. The new knowledge-based society must be an **inclusive** society. Here too, the Internet offers tremendous possibilities: anyone who can use a computer can participate in society at the click of a mouse. eEurope and its component programmes (eLearning, eHealth, eGovernment and eBusiness) focus on fully exploiting this potential for social inclusion.

The enlargement of the EU makes this all the more important. In or around 2004, as many as ten new countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia) are expected to join the Union, adding some 75 million citizens to our existing community of 375 million. Social inclusion is vital to the success of this major enlargement, and “digital inclusion” is an important aspect of it.

In emphasising digital inclusion, the European Commission aims to distinguish the European approach to the information society from other regions of the world. It is no secret that the United States for example outperformed Europe in the initial speed with which industry and citizens took up the Internet. eEurope is now, however, helping Europe catch up, channelling efforts at regional, national and European levels to ensure that the digital economy brings benefits to **all** European citizens and to put a European stamp on the Internet.

The EU effort is designed to build on and to strengthen the "European social model", including a high level of social protection. It is also meant to preserve Europe's cultural and linguistic diversity. It focuses on developing European content in European languages so that everybody has access to services and content in their own mother tongue. The Internet may turn the world into a global village, but the EU is committed to ensuring that in this village every culture and every language maintains its role at local level.

How to keep Europe competitive

To operate profitably in today's global marketplace, businesses rely on information and communication technologies – whether to contact their customers and suppliers, to process accounts, to run manufacturing plants or to file taxes.

So information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become "enabling technologies". In other words, they underpin the competitiveness and smooth operation of all sectors of the economy. Greater use of ICTs therefore boosts growth and competitiveness.

But you do not achieve a strong, competitive economy simply by incorporating digital technologies into manufacturing or services: you also need highly skilled workers to operate the new systems, and digitally literate consumers to buy the new goods and services. That means training and education for people of all ages. So your competitiveness depends on how much you **invest in people**.

Politicians are, moreover, well aware that ICTs make a direct and major contribution to the EU economy. In western Europe, the ICT sector was worth 643 billion euro in 2001 or 7.5% of GDP. It grew by 5.1% in 2001 thanks to a 3.9% growth in IT and 6.4% growth in telecommunications, according to the European Information Technology Observatory.

At Lisbon in March 2000, EU leaders acknowledged these facts. In their summit conclusions they stressed that

- "businesses and citizens must have access to an inexpensive, world-class communications infrastructure and a wide range of services",
- "every citizen must be equipped with the skills needed to live and work in this new information society" and
- "a higher priority must be given to lifelong learning as a basic component of the European social model."

The overall goal EU leaders set themselves at Lisbon was to make the European Union the world's most competitive knowledge-based society by 2010. Every spring they meet to take stock of progress towards this goal, and to identify the priorities for the next 12 months.

Free markets and better research

Although e-Europe has a key role to play in achieving the Lisbon goal, it is not the whole story. The EU also needs to invest more in research and to open up its markets to greater competition – especially in some key sectors which, until now, have been dominated by national suppliers.

So it has set itself timetables for, among other things:

- liberalising Europe's energy and telecoms markets,
- creating a single market in financial services,
- further liberalising postal and transport services,
- introducing an EU patent,

- launching the Galileo satellite navigation system,
- creating a single market for air transport – known as the "Single European Sky".

EU leaders have also agreed to increase spending on research, so that, by 2010, as much as 3% of their GDP will be invested in research and technological development.

eEurope: the components

The European Union's eEurope scheme is based on the premise that the Internet is essential to future economic growth, job creation and improvements in the quality of life – not only in Europe but across the globe. eEurope is necessarily ambitious. It aims to bring everyone in the European Union online as quickly as possible so that using the Internet becomes commonplace - whether by way of a computer, a mobile phone or a television set-top box and whether at the office, at school or at home.

It seeks to create a **digitally literate Europe** and to ensure that the whole process is socially inclusive, builds consumer trust and narrows the gap between the haves and have-nots in European society.

The European Commission launched the basic outline for eEurope in November 1999. Subsequent action plans have set out roadmaps of what needs to be done by when.

There have, so far, been two action plans:

- the Action Plan 2002 endorsed by the EU leaders at their Feira summit in June 2000;
- the Action Plan 2005 approved by EU leaders in Seville in June 2002.

Both plans pursue the aim of creating an inclusive information society, but since 2000 the situation has evolved: some measures have been completed and new challenges have emerged. So the second Action Plan updates the EU's priorities and fine-tunes the process.

Action Plan 2002 cast its net very wide and successfully put the Internet at the top of the European political agenda. Action Plan 2005 narrows the focus, concentrating on effective access, usage and the ready availability of the Internet.

eEurope 2005 puts users at the centre. At all levels and in all implementing measures it emphasises e-inclusion, including e-accessibility for people with special needs. E-inclusion means that key services must be available not only via personal computer but also via interactive digital television, third generation mobile phones and cable networks.

As the EU leaders stated, the new Action Plan should focus on "the widespread availability and use of broadband networks throughout the Union by 2005 and….the security of networks and information, e-government, e-learning, e-health and e-business'.

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How does the EU work?

The eEurope effort is not about creating new institutions or laws. It is about bringing coordination and a common goal to political actions that already take place in many different contexts:

*** National competence:** each EU country has the exclusive right to decide how its schools and public services systems work. They have, however, decided to try to learn more from each other by agreeing common goals and to exchange information on their progress towards achieving them. This is referred to as the "open coordination method". Regional or local authorities are often responsible for the action on the ground.

*** European Union competence:** The EU treaties say that **European laws** can be made on matters such as free trade in goods. Some of this legislation is adapted to take account of new technologies. The **EU budget** finances programmes to promote development in less well off regions, research, educational exchanges, etc. Some of this money is re-directed to promote Internet use.
[box ends]

Accomplishments to date: eEurope 2002

When the eEurope programme was conceived in 2000, use of the Internet in the Europe was being hampered mainly by:

- expensive, insecure and slow access;
- an insufficient number of digitally literate people on line;
- the lack of a sufficiently dynamic, entrepreneurial, service-oriented culture;
- the public sector not doing enough to help develop new applications and services.

eEurope identified the steps needed to correct these weaknesses. They centred on three main objectives:

- to develop cheaper, faster and secure Internet access;
- to invest in people and skills;
- to stimulate use of the Internet.

eEurope 2002 has achieved significant successes in all these areas during the last three years.

Cheaper, faster and secure Internet access

One of the top priorities for eEurope 2002 was to modernise the rules and regulations governing Internet access and to create a single market for all telecommunications services.

Conditions for Internet access have been influenced by laws and structures from earlier times, when most customers depended on just one monopoly telephone company. Liberalisation began in the late 1980s but did not go far enough. So in March 2002 the EU formally adopted a new regulatory framework. The package will simplify and streamline the existing EU legislative framework, cutting the number of laws from 23 down to eight and creating a truly liberalised telecoms market where competition cuts prices and improves the quality of services. The result will be cheaper and faster Internet access for citizens and business alike.

But what about making it secure? The risks of security breaches multiply with the Internet explosion, so if Europe is to succeed in bringing and keeping users online it must ensure consumer and business confidence in the Internet.

Here too, the EU has been active. The Commission has set out comprehensive strategies for network and information security. It has also proposed a Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism (which includes attacks against information systems) and a specific Decision on Attacks against Computer Systems. The aim is to ensure that the different EU countries all take tough action against the perpetrators of serious attacks.

Equally important to building consumer confidence is data protection and privacy. A 1995 EU framework Directive and a specific 1998 Directive (later modified) covering

electronic communications guarantee a high level of privacy for the individual and ensure free movement of personal data within the EU and to third countries with similar standards.

Results: By mid-2002, 40% of EU households had Internet access, according to the "eEurope Benchmarking Report" for 2002, up from 18% in March 2000. This staggering improvement means that there are roughly 150 million web users in Europe - on a par with the US. The number of web users world wide is 404 million, and this figure is expected to grow to 550 million by 2005.

Internet access costs are going down. A Commission survey carried out in November 2001 found that, for a typical residential user (i.e. 20 hours of usage off-peak), monthly costs were between 10 and 20 euro for the cheapest offer in most Member States, including call charges.

Investing in people and skills

At their Lisbon summit, EU leaders acknowledged that future competitiveness depended on a renovated education policy including "e-learning" and life-long vocational training.

Each EU country remains fully responsible for organising its own national education system and for what is taught in its schools and colleges. But the EU plays a crucial role in co-ordinating national policies towards common EU-wide objectives.

That is where the 'e-Learning' programme comes in. It co-ordinates national efforts to modernise our education and vocational training systems. The aim is to ensure that school leavers are all computer-literate and that workers have the right to life-long learning so they can keep up with the Internet revolution at their workplace.

This modernisation drive gives school children and students opportunities for on line education that many school and college libraries cannot otherwise afford to provide, and certainly not in the quantities necessary.

Meanwhile, manufacturing and service industries will have the highly skilled workers they need, and digitally literate consumers will be ready to buy their new products and services.

The governments of the EU countries have committed themselves:

- to a substantial annual increase in per capita investment in human resources including an increase in spending on education, from an average 5% of GDP in 1999 and 5.1% in 2000;
- to halve by 2010 the number of 18 to 24 year olds with only lower-secondary level education who are not in further education and training;
- to turn schools and training centres, all linked to the Internet, into multi-purpose local learning centres accessible to all;

- to agree a European framework defining new basic skills (including IT skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills) to be provided through lifelong learning.

Results: The initial target was that by the end of 2001 **all** schools in the EU should have access to the Internet and multimedia resources. The Union has achieved a 93% Internet access for schools in 2002 compared to 89% in 2001. Of these, 64% have ISDN connections while 19% have broadband access via the ADSL technology. There are still major discrepancies between the different EU countries but the gaps are narrowing. In 2001 there was on average one online computer for every 25 students. In 2002 there were only 17 students to every online computer. The objective in 2002 is to lower the ratio to 15 students per online computer by the end of 2003.

At the workplace, the goal is to ensure that the people of Europe are in a position to acquire - at any time in life - new knowledge and skills to ensure their future employability. This objective is crucial in social terms if the EU is to head off exclusion in a European Union in which 150 million citizens have not completed higher secondary level education. The guarantee of life-long learning is therefore of fundamental importance to our European social model, and helps make e-inclusion possible.

By 2002, more than half of EU workers were using computers at their workplace, and this has grown by about a fifth since 2001. Three out of four white-collar workers are computer users**.** However, not enough people are receiving the necessary training: only about a third of the EU workforce has ever had computer training for a job. This situation has to improve: digital skills are essential to the employability of workers in all sectors.

Stimulating the use of the Internet

To stimulate Internet take-up the EU has concentrated on providing a favourable environment in which companies and any other types of organisation can develop digital skills and services. It has, for example, set out a legal framework for electronic commerce in a Directive which became law throughout the EU in January 2002. In March 2002 the formal decision was taken to create the '.eu' top level domain which will allow European citizens, organisations and businesses to have web-sites and e-mail addresses that end with ".eu" instead of letters indicating a country or ".com".

But most EU action has not involved legislation. Instead it has relied on peer pressure and the annual "spring reviews" to make sure the individual EU countries actually do what they have promised each other to promote eGovernment, eHealth, eContent and similar initiatives.

Easy access to public services

The motto for the **'eGovernment**' scheme is "better online than in line." Its aim is to provide easy electronic access to public services. No longer need we stand in queues waiting to be served! EU governments have started making 20 basic services available on line. For citizens these services include filing income tax returns and

looking for jobs, while businesses can now use the Internet to file VAT returns, to register new companies, to make customs declarations and for public procurement.

Results: In April 2002, research carried out for the European Commission showed that, on average, 55% of basic public services were available on line compared to 45% in October 2001 and that most of the websites surveyed already provide more interactivity than simply downloading forms.

It also reveals that the provision of eGovernment services to business (68%) is progressing much faster than to citizens (47%). The sole exception is the Netherlands where online public services to citizens are more widespread than services to business.

Services which involve paying money to the public sector remain the highest performer with a 79% rate in April 2002 compared to 62% in October 2001. Of these services, VAT declarations have the highest score (88%).

Overall, Ireland has the highest score (85%) followed by Sweden (81%), Finland (70%) and Denmark (69%).

[box]

Government made simple

The 20 types of public services, where governments are making life easier through new technology:

Public services for citizens:

1. Income taxes: declaration, notification of assessment
2. Job search services by labour offices
3. Social security contributions
   - Unemployment benefits
   - Family allowances
   - Medical costs (reimbursement or direct settlement)
   - Student grants
4. Personal documents (passport and driver's licence)
5. Car registration (new, used and imported cars)
6. Application for building permission
7. Declaration to the police (e.g. in case of theft)
8. Public libraries (availability of catalogues, search tools)
9. Certificates (birth, marriage): request and delivery
10. Enrolment in higher education / university
11. Announcement of moving (change of address)
12. Health related services (e.g. interactive advice on the availability of services in different hospitals; appointments for hospitals.)

Public services for businesses:

1. Social contribution for employees
2. Corporation tax: declaration, notification
3. VAT: declaration, notification
4. Registration of a new company
5. Submission of data to statistical offices

6. Customs declarations
7. Environment-related permits (incl. reporting)
8. Public procurement
[box ends]

Doctors on line

Another initiative, '**eHealth,**' aims to use digital technologies to improve the quality and accessibility of health services. This includes e-accessibility for the disabled.

In March 2002, the EU Council of Ministers adopted a Resolution designed to facilitate Internet access for 37 million disabled people in Europe by agreeing a set of internationally recognised standards. The Resolution also calls on Member States and the Commission to "establish a permanent dialogue with organisations representing disabled persons and organisations representing the elderly with a view to taking account of their comments and concerns."

Results: There has been considerable progress in Internet take-up by general practitioner doctors. In June 2001, 60% of all primary care providers were equipped with an Internet connection, compared to 48% in May 2000. Over the same period, the percentage of general practitioners using the Internet to communicate with patients rose from 12% to 34%.

The content is the real thing

A third initiative, **'eContent'**, is aimed at ensuring that content and information on the net is available in your own language. Currently, 75% of all pages on the World Wide Web are in English.

In April 2002, the Commission proposed a Directive to harmonise some of the conditions governing the use of public sector information. It is based on the principle that all such information should be reusable for commercial or non-commercial purposes, and it requires the public authorities supplying the information to apply tariffs based on costs. The proposal is designed to stimulate the creation of Internet content - a market estimated to be worth 433 billion euro in Europe and employing four million people.

Results: Internet penetration in businesses is far higher than the household rate. According to a Eurobarometre survey, almost 90% of firms with more than 10 employees have an Internet connection and more than 60% have a website. A notable exception is Portugal, where only two thirds of all businesses have an Internet connection and only about one third have their own website.

On average, around 20% of European companies buy and sell over the Internet, with Germany, Ireland and the UK spearheading the sales part and Denmark and Finland strong on the online purchasing side. In six Member States, more than 30% of all firms purchase some or all of their supplies via the Internet with Finland and Denmark

above 40%. At the other end of the scale, only 5% of Portuguese and 10% of French enterprises use the Internet to purchase their supplies.

The future: eEurope 2005

The creation of an information society is a moving target. The process must be continually fine-tuned as new challenges emerge and obstacles persist.

Upgrading our education and life-long learning standards is a continuing process, as is learning to use the Internet in more advanced ways. Although eEurope 2002 took Europe part of the way to the information society, there is still a long way to go.

However, eEurope is steadily achieving its objectives. Internet access costs, originally identified as one of the major hurdles, are going down. The marginal costs of Internet access for a PC owner have become small, but remain significantly higher than in the United States. They are also much higher for broadband Internet access. Slow e-commerce development and difficult broadband deployment are also important challenges that must be tackled.

To overcome these deficiencies while building on the successes of eEurope 2002, eEurope 2005 focuses on a more limited number of priorities. These concern the effective use of the Internet for e-commerce and public services, including schools and businesses.

It gives top priority to e-government, e-learning and e-health and the creation of a dynamic environment for the development of e-business. The Action Plan sets out two groups of actions that reinforce each other and which are both essential in enabling the provision of priority services:

- action to ensure widespread broadband access and a secure information infrastructure,
- services, applications and content, covering online public services and e-business.

Broadband access and security: the great enablers

Action Plan 2005 seeks to accelerate the rollout of "broadband services" – i.e. the high-speed transmission of voice, data and video signals over fixed or mobile networks. These networks include fixed-wireless, fibre optics and satellite links, and will also include third-generation mobile phones (UMTS) when these become widely used. By 2002, however, the networks most readily available are ADSL and cable modem networks. ADSL stands for "asynchronous digital subscriber lines" which, by means of data compression, can provide digital broadband services over an existing phone line.

Currently, broadband systems provide Internet access at speeds of up to 1.5 megabits per second, roughly 25 times faster than a standard telephone modem working at 56 kilobits per second, allowing people to quickly download big data files. They also allow users to stay permanently on line ("always-on" connections).

Rolling out broadband requires the promotion of content, services and applications. Consumers will not buy broadband services unless useful or enjoyable content in their own language is available to simplify or improve their lives. Without strong demand from users, investment in infrastructure will not materialise. But in the typical chicken and egg dilemma, there will be no push to develop new applications and content unless the supporting infrastructure exists.

The more networks and computers become a central part of business and daily life, the more need there is for data security. Secure networks and information systems are therefore a key "enabler" for e-businesses and a pre-requisite for privacy. To meet this challenge, the EU has already launched a comprehensive strategy based on its communications (strategic policy decisions) on network security and cyber crime, and the data protection Directive on electronic communications.

eEurope 2005 actions:

- The EU countries are to use the EU's existing Structural Funds (regional and social funds, etc) to facilitate broadband access in remote and rural regions;
- The EU countries should eliminate legislative barriers, promote investments in broadband notably by easing "right –of –way" restrictions;
- By mid-2003, a Cyber Security Task Force (CSTF) is to be up and running as a centre of competence on security questions.

eGovernment

eGovernment is a key component of Action Plan 2005 because it is a means of getting government massively on line, thereby bringing much of the economy with it.

The public sector can act as a catalyst since it is both a supplier of information and a customer in need of broader bandwidth to provide this information to citizens. Today the public sector is the single biggest holder and producer of content in Europe, so there is huge potential for re-using public sector information for added value services.

Action Plan 2005 also places the emphasis on e-government in "back offices". The aim is to improve efficiency in the back offices of central, regional and local government, as this is seen as the first necessary step towards improving the front office services provided to the citizen.

eEurope 2005 actions:

- By the end of 2003 the Commission will put forward an "interoperability framework" – involving common technical specifications to ensure that national e-government services can be delivered to citizens and businesses throughout the European Union;
- by the end of 2004, EU governments will ensure that 20 basic services are available on line, interactively. This must include guaranteed access for citizens with special needs;

- by the end of 2005, the EU Member States will carry out a significant portion of their public procurement electronically.

eLearning

If the European Union is to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, it must have a vigorous education strategy. It is for the education authorities in each country to develop the skills of its citizens through education and life long learning, but the Europe-wide "eLearning" initiative promotes new online ways of learning throughout the EU.

At their summit in Barcelona in March 2002, the EU's heads of State and government set themselves the target of ensuring that, by the end of 2003, there would be one online computer, used for educational purposes, for every 15 pupils in EU schools.

eEurope 2005 actions:

- EU governments should seek to ensure that all schools and universities have broadband access by the end of 2005;
- by the end of 2002, the EU should have in place an eLearning Programme to implement the eLearning Action Plan in 2004-2006;
- by the end of 2003, EU governments should launch training programmes to provide adults with the skills they need for employment in the knowledge society.

eHealth

Digital technologies are becoming essential to health management at all levels – from the family doctor to the Ministry of Health. They have the potential to cut costs, to deliver health care at a distance and to make health records accessible to the people who need to consult them. This will avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. For example, you will not have to undergo the same medical examination twice just because two different doctors need the same information.

eEurope provides the framework within which these efforts can be combined in a strategy that delivers visible results by 2005.

eEurope 2005 actions:

- By spring 2003, the European Commission will propose the introduction of electronic health cards based on common standards and exchange of best practice;
- By the end of 2005, EU governments should develop health information networks linking hospitals, laboratories and homes;
- By the end of2005, the European Commission and EU governments will ensure the online provision of health services, including information on healthy living and illness prevention, electronic health records, e-reimbursement, etc.

eBusiness

The concept of "e-business" refers to both e-commerce (buying and selling online) and restructuring business processes to make the best use of digital technologies.

It is precisely when information technologies transform traditional business procedures, products and services that e-business fulfils its potential. Clearly the responsibility for both activities lies with industry, but governments determine the regulatory environment that can either stimulate or undermine the development of e-businesses.

eEurope 2005 actions:

- An e-business summit will take place in 2003 to give high-level business representatives the opportunity to describe the difficulties encountered when doing e-business.
- By the end of 2003, the Commission will set up an e-business support network to promote the take up of digital technologies and processes by small and medium sized businesses;
- By the end of 2003, the private sector should develop interoperable *e*-business solutions for transactions, security, signatures, procurement and payments;
- By the end of 2003, the Commission will examine possible ways of setting up an EU-wide online dispute resolution system.

Where do we go from here?

The EU's eEurope initiative was designed as a means of getting Europe online as quickly as possible. It also gives the Internet a European dimension by encouraging multi-lingual content and by allowing European countries to build on their competitive advantages in areas such as mobile phone technologies and digital television.

Achieving the eEurope goals will certainly help create jobs and make European industries more competitive. This is part of the EU's continuing efforts to fulfil its obligation - enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union – "to promote economic and social progress and a high level of employment".

The success of eEurope depends not only on the European institutions but on national, regional and local government throughout the EU, on businesses, schools, hospitals… In fact, it depends on you – the European citizen. eEurope is designed for you: it's up to you to take the fullest advantage of it and make it work for you.

Further reading

Documents, news and other information on the subjects dealt with in this brochure can be found on the web site of the European Commission for eEurope:
http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm

Information in particular about education and training:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/index_en.html