

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Employment support measures

(2004/C 110/22)

On 17 July 2003, the European Economic and Social Committee decided to draw up an opinion, in accordance with Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, on Employment support measures.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on this subject, adopted its opinion on 4 February 2004. The rapporteur was Mrs Hornung-Draus. The co-rapporteur was Mr Greif.

At its 406th plenary session, held on 25 and 26 February 2004 (meeting of 26 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 102 votes to 10 with 11 abstentions:

1. Summary and overall appraisal

The EESC welcomes the report of the Employment Taskforce, chaired by Wim Kok, which has succeeded in presenting a largely balanced analysis of the current challenges facing employment policy. The report graphically demonstrates to the Member States the pressing need for reform.

1.1 The method adopted by the Taskforce, namely using benchmarking and the identification of good practice to make specific proposals for improvements to employment-policy measures, is a welcome approach. The EESC considers the following measures referred to by the Taskforce as particularly important with a view to strengthening the EU's international competitiveness, in a manner which safeguards social stability, and creating more jobs:

- promotion of an entrepreneurial culture and reduction of excessive administrative and regulatory obstacles to new company start-ups and entrepreneurial activity;
- strengthening of innovation and research by stepping up investment in these fields, whilst, at the same time, promoting a climate which is favourable to innovation;
- creation of greater flexibility for workers and employers, without losing sight of the necessary balance between flexibility and job security on the labour market, it being particularly important to link new forms of labour market flexibility with new forms of job security;
- setting of taxes and social security contributions in such a way that they do not act as a brake on recruitment, as long as this does not jeopardise the financial basis and the social function of social security systems;
- increasing the participation rate of women by creating favourable conditions for combining family and career, particularly with regard to childcare;

- creation of incentives for workers to retire later and for employers to take on and retain older workers by means of appropriate general personnel policy and labour market conditions;
- raising the basic level of education, efforts to improve basic education in schools and basic vocational training, together with endeavours to coordinate university education more effectively with the requirements of the labour market;
- promotion of lifelong learning, involving all relevant actors
 - government, individuals and business;
- urgently needed stepping-up of measures to combat unemployment at all levels: in the EU, at national level and at local level;
- strengthening the role of national parliaments and the social partners in the process of drawing up national action plans.

1.2 The EESC is glad that the Taskforce deals with the implementation of the proposed reforms. In this area in particular increased efforts are needed in many cases. More needs to be done than hitherto to convince the public that economically and socially balanced structural reforms result in the strengthening of Europe and the improvement of the labour-market situation.

The EESC also regards certain aspects of the Taskforce's report critically:

- it would have been a good idea for the Taskforce, in some parts of its report, to have dealt more comprehensively with the employment-policy challenges, e.g. by focusing more sharply on the teaching of science and the imparting of key social skills or the reduction of obstacles to successful entrepreneurial activity;

- the report fails to give due acknowledgement to the fact that, in addition to structural measures with regard to the labour market, a successful employment policy depends on growth and employment-orientated macroeconomic policy;
- the report does not address in appropriate detail the key issue of promoting the sustained integration of young people into the labour market. Furthermore, the report fails to address – over and above the undisputed role played by the social partners in this field – the importance of social bodies such as NGOs, welfare associations and cooperatives, which work on behalf of unemployed persons and the victims of social exclusion;
- statutory compulsory contributions from all companies are suggested as one of the possible solutions to the problem of the allocation between employers of the costs of investment in human capital. In view of the specific features of the respective Member States it is, however, questionable whether adopting such an approach, throughout the EU, is the right way to promote investment in human capital. It would be desirable in some cases, rather to promote wider use of voluntary solutions involving the use of pools and funds, including agreements between the social partners, e.g. at local, regional, sectoral or national levels, in order to enable, in particular SMEs, to step up their investment in human resources;
- whilst a balance has been found in the thematic chapters of the report between the promotion of labour-market flexibility and security, the right balance is not struck in, in particular, the concluding Chapter 5 on governance, to the detriment of the necessary security, which a flexible labour market needs to have;
- the question as to the impact of EU-level legislation on the current employment situation is not addressed;
- the Report fails adequately to address the relation between active measures to stimulate increased employment – as mentioned in the Report – which are bound to result in additional costs to be met by the public purse, and the demand that these reforms be implemented within the budgetary constraints deriving from the Growth and Stability Pact.

1.3 The employment trend is a key issue for the EESC; it intends to keep a very close watching brief on the situation and to actively follow up developments. The EESC hopes that its above observations will be taken into account in the ensuing discussions on this issue.

1.4 In this context the EESC reiterates its firm belief, which it has already expressed on many occasions, namely that the chief way to achieve this goal is through the close involvement

of the autonomous labour market partners at all levels and at all stages of the European Employment Strategy from the formulation of the strategy right through to its implementation and its appraisal, and by involving national parliaments in the corresponding procedures at national level. In order to make this possible, the respective timetables will have to be aligned.

2. Introduction

2.1 A high level of employment is a vital basis for sustainable development in society. Employment is a key prerequisite for moulding the various social groups into a functioning social system and it makes an essential contribution to social integration. Employment also bridges the generation gap between young and old and brings together people from various regions and social strata. Jobless totals are high throughout the EU; safeguarding employment, enhancing the quality of employment and increasing the number of jobs are therefore pressing tasks.

2.2 Persistently high levels of unemployment - which are now once again on the increase - in many EU Member States, are giving rise to pressing economic and social problems. All Member States are called upon to give the highest priority to measures to improve the labour market situation by promoting economic growth and a growth in employment and by reducing the high level of unemployment. The aim is to translate into reality the objectives for the EU defined in Lisbon in 2000. According to these objectives, the EU should by 2010 become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. This goal embraces the fields of economic growth (3 % per annum), jobs (setting, in particular, the target of achieving an employment rate of 70 %) and social cohesion.

2.2.1 The EESC has not wavered in its view that, when compared with the Lisbon objectives – which it endorsed and supported – considerable weaknesses and gaps remain in many Member States, particularly with regard to the rate of employment, measures to combat unemployment, and productivity. ⁽¹⁾ In order to fill these gaps, there is also a need to start by examining the causes of the current situation. One of the factors involved is the increasing pace of technological change which makes it necessary for knowledge to be constantly adapted to bring it into line with new requirements. Another factor is the failure of the EU Member States to respond adequately to the advance of globalisation which also obliges enterprises to make structural adjustments with ever increasing frequency and speed, in order to remain competitive. Yet another factor is the sometimes inadequate forecasting of skills requirements and provision of the requisite training.

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on the European Employment Strategy (OJ C 133, 6.6.2003)

2.2.2 If there is to be an appropriate response to these problems, the following issues, in particular, need to be addressed:

- measures to promote economic growth: coordinating the timing of employment-policy guidelines and the broad guidelines for economic policies provides a means of backing up the Lisbon objectives. A further means of promoting these objectives is by seeking to interlink the contents of the processes to a greater extent. The EESC firmly believes that 'without strong and sustainable economic growth it will be difficult to achieve the [Lisbon] objectives'.⁽²⁾ The Lisbon objectives necessitate a stronger orientation of EU economic policy towards the goal of achieving a higher level of employment. Attention needs to be paid not only to employment policy measures and labour market policy measures but also to general economic policy in order to give a new impetus to growth in Europe, as a prerequisite for improving the employment situation, by implementing the broad guidelines of economic policy in a more purposeful and effective way in practice and by incorporating these guidelines more effectively in other policy areas⁽³⁾;
- international trade, free trade systems, globalisation: in these areas there will be opportunities to boost economic growth and employment but there will also be new challenges to be met. One of the consequences will be that enterprises will have to make structural adjustments ever more frequently and rapidly in order to remain competitive. This requirement will have a significant impact on economic and social development in the EU. It will affect not only large enterprises but also, and in particular, small enterprises. The EESC has also addressed this issue in a number of opinions⁽⁴⁾;
- structures having a bearing on employment in the individual EU Member States: in its report of November 2003, the Taskforce on Employment set out practical reform measures to be addressed by the EU Member States as of now. These issues are examined in this own-initiative opinion of the EESC.

2.3 The EESC welcomes the establishment of the European Employment Taskforce, chaired by Wim Kok. This Taskforce was set up at the European Summit held last spring with a view to pinpointing the challenges facing employment policy and putting forward practical proposals for reform, at both EU level and at the level of the Member States, with a view to providing further input in respect of the EU employment strategy. The Taskforce impresses upon the governments the urgent need for far-reaching reform and urges both the current EU Member States and the future Member States also to implement these reforms in reality.

2.3.1 The Taskforce submitted its report in November 2003; the report addresses the following issues:

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on the Proposal for a Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States OJ C 208 of 3.9.2003

⁽³⁾ EESC opinion on the Broad economic policy guidelines for 2003 (OJ C 133 of 6.6.2003); see also the EESC opinion on Economic governance in the EU (OJ C 85 of 8.4.2003) and the EESC opinion on Broad economic policy guidelines of 11.12.2003

⁽⁴⁾ EESC Information Report on Coping with globalisation EESC opinion entitled 'For a WTO with a human face: the EESC's proposals' (OJ C 133, 6.6.2003); opinion on the preparation of the Fifth WTO Ministerial Conference (OJ No. C 234 of 30.9.2003)

- adaptability (promotion of the establishment of new enterprises, maximization of job-creation, development and dissemination of innovation and research, promotion of flexibility and security on the labour market);
- labour markets (need to make work pay, strengthening of active employment measures, increasing the number of women in gainful employment, strategies for reacting to the problem of the ageing population, integration of minorities and immigrants);
- investments in human resources (achievement of a higher level of education, allocation of costs and responsibilities, facilitating access to lifelong learning);
- reform through mobility (mobilisation of society, implementation of reforms, improving the leverage exercised by EU instruments).

2.3.2 The Taskforce report pinpoints four key factors which are of vital importance in bringing about an increase in employment and productivity; these factors are as follows:

- increased adaptability on the part of both workers and enterprises;
- the need to make the labour market more attractive to a larger number of people;
- increased and more effective investment in human capital;
- more effective implementation of reforms through the introduction of better employment measures.

2.3.3 The EESC broadly welcomes the report submitted by the Taskforce. The Employment Taskforce has succeeded in drawing up a largely balanced analysis of current employment-policy challenges. The EESC is, however, critical of certain aspects.

The report demonstrates to political decision-makers in the Member States and at EU level how urgent it is to introduce and implement reforms to enable the European Union to achieve the objective set in Lisbon of becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.

2.4 In order to assist the Lisbon Process, it is both important and appropriate to carry out benchmarking as a learning process at EU level, as part of the European Employment Strategy (EES), whilst leaving responsibility in the hands of the individual Member States⁽⁵⁾. The EU can propose a framework and encourage the Member States to flesh it out. By pinpointing problems on the labour markets of the EU and coordinating labour market measures at EU level, the EES makes a positive contribution towards providing a useful framework and important stimuli for tackling challenges at national and local levels. The Member States are urged to lose no time in taking account of these stimuli in their policies.

⁽⁵⁾ EESC opinion on the European Employment Strategy (EES), OJ C 133, 6.6.2003; EESC opinion on Employment policy guidelines, OJ C 208, 3.9.2003

2.4.1 The new, medium-term orientation of the employment-policy guidelines, covering the period up to 2010, is the right choice and one which makes sense⁽⁶⁾. Greater stability and a longer-term perspective serve to strengthen a policy which seeks to back up short-term measures by adopting a medium- and long-term orientation, thereby making it possible to set out fundamental pointers to the way forward. The achievement of greater coherence and complementarity by coordinating more effectively the time schedules for the employment policy guidelines and the broad guidelines for economic policies, together with the other processes covered by the open method of coordination (social exclusion, pensions, etc.) is helping to achieve the Lisbon objectives. In the EESC's view efforts should be made to bring about a further alignment of the contents of the coordination policies. At the same time, even greater importance should be attached to the aspects of implementing the guidelines in the Member States, results and appraisal. The fact must also not be overlooked that a successful European employment strategy, which boosts employment, makes a key contribution to social integration. In this context, the EESC would stress that the objectives in respect of economic employment and social policy set out at the Lisbon European Council, form part of a coherent whole and should not be considered in isolation.

2.5 Europe is about to undergo major changes, not least because of the forthcoming enlargement of the EU. The establishment of an internal market of over 450 million people, the development of new markets, and the extension of cross-border infrastructure will provide the whole of Europe with a new economic impetus and also strongly influence developments in the field of employment. The EU-wide employment objectives set out in Lisbon are, in particular, about to be subjected to a major test. The current Member States are therefore urged to set national targets, also in the field of employment policy, in such a way as to prepare themselves to meet the new challenges. The EU should, at the same time, pay particular attention to the needs of the new Member States when formulating its employment strategy, so as to enable these states, too, to achieve EU employment goals in reality. The EESC has already addressed these issues in detail with representatives of organised civil society from the candidate countries within the framework of the joint consultative committees.⁽⁷⁾

Measures for promoting employment

3. Increasing adaptability

3.1 Economic development and the employment trend are closely linked. Economic growth and a climate which is propitious for investment are the key prerequisites for the creation of new jobs and the maintenance of existing employment. Economic success provides the basis for sustained creation and safeguarding of jobs. The establishment of a macro-economic policy mix which promotes international competitiveness and employment and embraces monetary, fiscal and wage policy

(whilst taking account of the responsibilities and autonomy of the various players involved) is an essential prerequisite for bringing the EU economy back onto the road to growth in such a way as to facilitate optimal exploitation of the growth and employment potential of the EU.

3.2 To achieve this aim it is, in the EESC's view necessary to provide enterprises with the general conditions which they need in order to enhance their ability to act and to enable them to focus on their core business activities and to create jobs, whilst, at the same time, assuming their social responsibility⁽⁸⁾. With a view to enabling enterprises to exploit to the full their potential to create jobs, the EESC draws attention to the call made by the European Employment Taskforce for the establishment and expansion of enterprises to be facilitated by, for example, cutting down on excessive administrative and regulatory obstacles to the establishment and running of enterprises and by providing these enterprises with a combination of advice and support through the establishment of one-stop shops.

3.3 In addition to the promotion of existing businesses, in particular SMEs, special attention should, in the EESC's view, also be paid to developing the entrepreneurial spirit and promoting business start-ups⁽⁹⁾. The foundations of the entrepreneurial spirit could already be laid while students are still undergoing training. In 2000, the European Charter for Small Enterprises set out key requirements which needed to be implemented in order to strengthen small enterprises⁽¹⁰⁾. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Employment Taskforce is taking a close look at the conditions which need to be met in order to facilitate the establishment of enterprises. The Report rightly highlights the particular need to reduce the amount of time it takes to set up enterprises and the costs involved. There are quite considerable differences between the Member States in this context; these differences should be removed. The Report of the Taskforce also identifies important general conditions which need to be in place in order to promote the development of SMEs, such as access to finance. Furthermore the considerable employment potential offered by SMEs should be exploited and expanded. Attention should also be paid in this context to promoting employment in micro-enterprises. In order to enable people to set themselves up in business as self-employed persons and to prepare them for this activity, appropriate training and support should be provided for the persons concerned. By way of example, 'one-stop shops' for information should be established. Young entrepreneurs should take account of the development potential of particular sectors, such as the care sector and the environmental sector. In this context, the EESC has already drawn attention to the growing employment potential of the social economy⁽¹¹⁾. In its report the Taskforce calls upon the Member States to promote a culture of entrepreneurship and to remove the stigma attached to business failure. In the view of the EESC, too, these proposals for tackling the issues involved are of key importance.

⁽⁶⁾ EESC opinion on the employment policy guidelines (OJ C 208, 3.9.2003)

⁽⁷⁾ See, amongst others, the following EESC documents: REX/130 – 2003 – Vocational training and lifelong learning and their impact on employment in Estonia; REX/148 – 2003 – Joint declaration; REX/087 – 2002 – The situation of the small and medium-sized enterprises in Hungary compared to the SME policy of the EU

⁽⁸⁾ EESC opinion of 20.3.2002 on the Green Paper entitled 'Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility' (OJ C 125 of 27.5.2002)

⁽⁹⁾ EESC opinion on the Green Paper on Entrepreneurship in Europe

⁽¹⁰⁾ European Charter for Small Enterprises, June 2000; EESC opinion on a European Charter for Small Enterprises, OJ C 204, 18.7.2002

⁽¹¹⁾ See the EESC opinion on the social economy and the single market (OJ C 117 of 26.4.2000)

3.4 In its report the Taskforce addresses the issue of promoting innovation and research and disseminating information on this subject; the EESC also regards this approach as making a key contribution towards boosting adaptability and improving the quality of work. As a result of the increasing level of integration brought about by globalisation, the ability to innovate provides a key competitive advantage, for both enterprises and workers. In this respect the EESC welcomes the call made by the Taskforce for expenditure on R&D in the Member States to be increased in accordance with the targets set at the March 2003 European Council (3 % of GDP). It is, however, also necessary to promote the creation of a climate which is favourable to the transformation of ideas and research into innovation.

3.5 The Member States are called upon to take the necessary measures – in accordance with their respective national structures – to enable both enterprises and workers to respond more effectively to the gathering pace of change. In the EESC's view, it is important, in this context, to strike the right balance between flexibility and security on the labour markets in order to ensure that, on the one hand, enterprises are able to offer more employment and that, on the other hand, workers are provided with the requisite security. The EESC welcomes the balanced approach adopted by the Taskforce on employment in the chapter of its report dealing with the promotion of flexibility and security on the labour market. Although social and structural conditions differ from Member State to Member State, they do have aspects in common, to which, in the EESC's view, particular importance should be attached, namely:

- the modernisation and improvement of social security systems, in order to bring them into line with the present circumstances whilst, at the same time, maintaining their social protection functions;
- enhancing entrepreneurial flexibility by stepping up the adjustment of the general conditions in order to bring them into line with the needs of enterprises and their workforces whilst, at the same time, ensuring adequate job security for workers;
- promoting and consolidating flexible forms of employment, such as temporary work, which may, if workers so wish, serve as a springboard for providing access to lasting employment; in this context, equal treatment and worker protection provisions should also be respected. It is also important to promote innovative forms of organising employment (e.g. teleworking). New forms of flexibility on the labour market should go hand in hand with new forms of security. In this context, the social partners have a very important role to play in establishing the appropriate general conditions, inter alia in respect of collective bargaining policy;
- promoting geographical mobility between EU Member States and within the labour markets of the respective Member States, e.g. by taking steps to overcome linguistic and cultural problems and to remove administrative barriers.

4. Making the labour market more attractive to a larger number of people

4.1 In calling for steps to be taken to 'make work pay', the Employment Taskforce is addressing an important issue. Taxa-

tion and social security systems in the Member States should be organised in such a way that it is worth their while for workers who join the labour market to stay there and to advance their careers. In the EESC's view, however, such a policy will only be successful if it is backed up by measures to boost the number of available jobs and – as pointed out by the Employment Taskforce – by measures to prevent people from being unable to escape from badly paid or unskilled work or repeated periods of unemployment. In this context, there is also an important need to convert undeclared work into legal employment; as the EESC already pointed out in its opinion on the future of the European Employment Strategy⁽¹²⁾, this objective can be attained by a combination of inspection measures and incentives and also by cutting the tax on employment. Taxes, social security contributions and the level of social security benefits should be determined in such a way as to ensure that the sound financial basis of the social security schemes and the responsibilities of the State in the field of infrastructure are not jeopardised.

4.2 The EESC sees the promotion of active preventive measures to assist unemployed persons and persons not in gainful employment as a key objective. Labour-market measures must be consistently geared to helping unemployed persons to rejoin the mainstream labour market. Special importance should be attached to the evaluation of these measures. It is also important to encourage unemployed persons to play an active role themselves in seeking work. Obstacles to such an active role should be removed, inter alia through the provision of tailor-made services. Employment agencies have an important role to play in this context. Efforts should be made to achieve close collaboration between the employment services and enterprises in order to facilitate flexible adjustments to meet the changing requirements of the labour market. The EESC also welcomes the recommendations made by the Taskforce in respect of prevention and encouraging unemployed persons to play an active role in seeking work; in the event of the restructuring of enterprises, priority should be given to active, rather than passive, measures, including the provision of information for employees and consultation of employees. The European social partners have made an initial important contribution in this context by publishing a document entitled 'Orientations for reference in managing change and its social consequences'⁽¹³⁾; this document is welcomed by the EESC.

4.3 It would have been desirable for the Taskforce to have addressed more thoroughly the issue of measures to integrate young people into the labour market and to combat youth unemployment. Particularly against the background of a difficult economic situation and an overstretched labour market, young people need to be provided with adequate assistance in order to enable them to secure a foothold in the labour market. With this aim in view, all of the labour-market players are urged to carry out a review of their current contributions towards combating young unemployment and their current policies in this field. All training courses for young people, particularly those geared towards traditional occupations, should include developing skills which are of importance in the expanding knowledge-based society. The EESC has dealt with this issue at length in a number of opinions⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽¹²⁾ EESC opinion on the European Employment Strategy (OJ C 133 of 6.6.2003)

⁽¹³⁾ Orientations for reference in managing change and its social consequences – 16.10.2003, UNICE, ETUC, CEEP, UEAPME

⁽¹⁴⁾ EESC Opinion on the European Commission White Paper entitled 'A new impetus for European youth' (OJ C 149 of 21.6.2002); EESC Opinion on the White Paper on Youth Policy (OJ C 116 of 20.4.2001)

4.4 Particular groups of individuals, such as persons with disabilities and less-skilled workers, together with particular groups of immigrants, who have to contend with additional difficulties on the labour market, frequently require special conditions to enable or to help them to find a job or remain in employment. The integration of these people is an important task for society. An active integration policy needs to be pursued. In order to enable the abovementioned groups of people to join the labour market and to remain in employment, there needs to be not just a change in the level of awareness of all social groups, but the appropriate general economic and personnel policy conditions also need to be created. Providing these people with the requisite skills makes a valuable contribution towards enabling them to assert themselves. The overriding objective in this context should be to secure their lasting integration into all forms of employment.

4.5 The EESC also welcomes the fact that the Employment Taskforce has addressed the issue of increasing the labour force participation rate of women. The EESC urges the Member States to continue with their efforts to make the world of work compatible with family life. The Lisbon European Council set out a target of raising the employment rate of women from 54 % (in 2000) to 60 %. If this objective is to be attained, the general conditions need to be improved in order to enable women to take up employment. This is a task for society as a whole. In particular, the provision of child-minding facilities makes it possible to reconcile family and occupational obligations and enables women to continue to work in gainful employment, or to rejoin the labour market quickly after a break. The EESC therefore welcomes the call made by the Council of the European Union to the Member States to remove the barriers preventing women from joining the labour market and also to make child-minding facilities available ⁽¹⁵⁾. The EESC likewise welcomes the call made by the Employment Taskforce to public authorities to ensure that such services are made available and affordable to the general public. It is also important for the Employment Taskforce to address the subject of flexible working-time arrangements, such as part-time work. The EESC also calls upon the parties to collective agreements to respect the principle of equal treatment for men and women in their agreements.

4.6 In view of the fact that the working population is both declining in number and ageing, the EU Member States are more than ever dependent upon the knowledge, wealth of experience and ability of older workers in order to enable them to maintain the capacity for innovation and competitiveness on a permanent basis. The promotion of 'active ageing' is an important issue for the EESC. The EESC therefore welcomes the call made by the Employment Taskforce for incentives to be provided, on the one hand, for workers to retire later and, on the other hand, for employers to take on and retain older workers. If this is to be achieved in reality, there is a need to create general economic and political conditions providing stronger incentives for longer working careers and also making it easier for enterprises to employ older workers, in particular. With a view to promoting the employment of older workers,

there is a need to have a labour market which also permits the employment of older workers. With this aim in view, all labour-market players need to take proactive measures, including pursuing further training in order to improve qualifications and adopting flexible methods of organising work, as pointed out in an investigation carried out by the Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions ⁽¹⁶⁾. Special attention should be paid to maintaining the working capacity of older workers. With this aim in view, organisation of work and personnel management in line with the needs of older people is just as important as the need to take the requisite measures in the fields of health and safety ⁽¹⁷⁾.

4.7 In view of the EU's declining labour force, the EESC has recently also drawn attention to the role which immigrants can play in ensuring that the EU labour market has an adequate potential supply of skilled workers ⁽¹⁸⁾.

5. Investment in human capital

5.1 A good school education backed up by good vocational training provides the key to a successful career. Europe is changing and becoming a 'knowledge-based Europe'. The EESC has, in earlier opinions, repeatedly drawn attention to the importance of education and intensively addressed the issue ⁽¹⁹⁾. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Employment Taskforce places special emphasis on education. The foundations of education are laid in schools. It is particularly important to reduce the number of pupils dropping out of school without having achieved an adequate level of skills and ability, as stressed by the Employment Taskforce in its report. The aim is to ensure that young people possess at least the basic qualifications which are vital to ensuring that they have a successful start to their working careers. In order to achieve this, there is a need to make schools more attractive, without cutting back on the quality of education. In the field of vocational training, too, in which the social partners have traditionally played an important role, it is essential to have an efficient system geared not to just meeting the general educational objectives but also to meeting the needs of the labour market.

⁽¹⁶⁾ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions document entitled 'Combating age barriers in employment'; in this context see also the EESC opinion on Older workers (OJ C 14 of 16.1.2001)

⁽¹⁷⁾ EESC opinion of 20.3.2002 on the Green Paper entitled 'Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility' (OJ C 125 of 27.5.2002)

⁽¹⁸⁾ See the EESC opinion of 10.12.2003 on the Communication from the Commission on immigration, integration and employment (SOC/138)

⁽¹⁹⁾ See, amongst others, the EESC opinions on the following subjects: The European dimension of education: its nature, content and prospects (OJ C 139, 11.5.2001); Lifelong learning (OJ C 311, 7.11.2001); European benchmarks in education and training (OJ C 133, 6.6.2003); the eLearning Action Plan – Designing tomorrow's education (OJ C 36, 8.2.2002); and the eLearning Programme (OJ C 133, 6.6.2003)

⁽¹⁵⁾ Council Decision on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (2003/578/EC)

5.2 The EESC calls for a further expansion of higher education. The call made by the Employment Taskforce for measures to be taken to enable a larger percentage of the population to study at colleges or universities pinpoints a desirable objective. There can, however, be no question of accepting a drop in the quality of higher education. The establishment of a 'European Higher Education Area' is a further important step. The EESC has long been calling for efforts to establish a 'European Learning Area' to be stepped up ⁽²⁰⁾. Qualifications need to be recognised throughout Europe and to be internationally transparent. The EESC therefore welcomes the decision taken by the European science ministers ⁽²¹⁾ to introduce the internationally recognised university degrees of 'master' and 'bachelor' in the next few years. With a view to making it easier for graduates to embark upon their professional careers, curricula should be examined to determine their relevance to the modern world of work.

5.3 The field of lifelong learning has an important role to play with regard to all groups of employees. The term 'lifelong learning' covers, in particular, lifelong, systematic and proactive endeavours by EU citizens to equip themselves, through education, to meet the present-day needs of everyday life ⁽²²⁾. In addi

tion to employees themselves, enterprises also have an interest in recognising and increasing occupational abilities. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Employment Taskforce also sees the public authorities as key players in this field. The social partners, too, have an important role to play here. As the benefits of lifelong learning are enjoyed by workers, enterprises and society as a whole, it is also natural that responsibility for organising lifelong learning and for meeting the attendant costs should also be shared. The provision of high-quality initial and further training gives employees the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills, reduces the risk of unemployment, increases the prospects of finding employment and therefore also helps to combat social exclusion. Investment in providing higher qualifications and strategies for lifelong learning are key factors with regard to the future competitiveness of European enterprises and are therefore rightly accorded a position of prominence in the European Employment Strategy. There is a need to strengthen initial and further training facilities, as regards their ability to provide students with the relevant skills, in order to improve the career development prospects of workers and to give them a better chance to find a job. The EESC welcomes the fact that the social partners have pursued this approach in the 'Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competences and Qualifications' ⁽²³⁾.

Brussels, 26 February 2004.

*The President
of the European Economic and Social
Committee*
Roger BRIESCH

⁽²⁰⁾ See, especially, the EESC opinion on the European Dimension of Education: its nature, content and prospects (OJ C 139, 11.5.2001)

⁽²¹⁾ Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003

⁽²²⁾ Opinion of the EESC on lifelong learning (OJ C 311, 7.11.2001)

⁽²³⁾ Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competences and Qualifications, published on 14.3.2002

APPENDIX

to the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Rejected amendment

The following amendment, which was supported by a quarter of the votes cast, was rejected in the course of the debate.

Point 3.5, third bullet point

~~'promoting and consolidating flexible forms of employment, such as temporary work, which may, if workers so wish, serve as a springboard for providing access to lasting employment; in this context, equal treatment and worker protection provisions should also be respected. It is also important to promote innovative forms of organising employment (e.g. teleworking). New forms of flexibility on the labour market should go hand in hand with new forms of security. In this context, the social partners have a very important role to play in establishing the appropriate general conditions, inter alia in respect of collective bargaining policy;~~

Delete the first two sentences and change the following two sentences so that the text reads as follows:

'New forms of flexibility on the labour market should go hand in hand with new forms of security. The general conditions for this should be established by the social partners through collective bargaining.'

Reason

The statement to promote temporary work cannot be an acceptable policy. There are situations where such forms of employment are necessary but the promotion should be for lasting employment. Flexible forms should be considered an exception to this. The rules for flexible employment should always be a question for the social partners.

Voting:

For: 53, against: 67, abstentions: 4.
