Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Training and productivity'

(2005/C 120/13)

By means of a letter of 22 April 2004 from the Minister for European Affairs, Mr Arto Nicolai, the Dutch Presidency asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to draw up an opinion on 'Training and productivity'.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 September 2004. The rapporteur was Mr Koryfdis.

At its 412th plenary session (meeting of 28 October 2004) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 81 votes to 1 with 1 abstention.

1. Background to the opinion

1.1 In response to the request from the Dutch Presidency to the EESC, the content of this exploratory opinion is determined by the following:

— the Dutch Presidency's programme, in particular its chapter on Social Europe and its openness to change (1);

— the decision of the Brussels European Council (2) (25 and 26 March 2004) to meet the Lisbon challenge, in particular its invitation to the EESC 'to examine ways and means for more effective implementation of the Lisbon Strategy' (3);

— the search for agreement, during the second half of 2004, between the 25 Member States concerning the new Social Policy Agenda (2006-2010) (4);

— the discussion and inclusion of the Lisbon and Gothenburg objectives in this agreement (5);

— the search for and the identification and presentation of the causes of the problems relating to the implementation of lifelong learning policies and of ways to improve the effectiveness of continuing training policies.

1.1.1 The overall context of the social policy and employment issues proposed by the Dutch Presidency will be discussed at a high-level conference on More People at Work: policies to activate Europe's labour potential which will take place in Amsterdam on 25 and 26 October 2004.

1.1.2 The objective of this conference is to discuss the structural changes that need to be made in four policy areas (6), while at the same time stepping up participation and maintaining social cohesion.

1.1.3 Finally, the Dutch Presidency has asked the EESC to focus on the following points:

— What are the main obstacles to implementing national and Community policies on continuing training in each Member State and in the EU as a whole, and how can these obstacles be overcome?

— What are the most effective ways of boosting continuing training?

— How does the way in which responsibilities are allocated between the different players involved in training (e.g. government, social partners as well as employees and employers) affect the organisation and success of continuing training? What is the most effective way of allocating roles and responsibilities and how can this be achieved?

2. Introduction

2.1 The EESC attaches considerable importance to the Dutch Presidency's request for this opinion to be drafted, in particular its content and scope, which reflect the broader objectives of, and the major problems facing, the EU in the area of sustainable development and, more specifically, employment, productivity and economic growth.

(1) See the Dutch Presidency's programme.
(2) See Presidency conclusions – chapter III.
(3) See point 45 of these conclusions.
(4) The new Social Agenda will be presented by the Commission in the first half of 2005.
(5) A mid-term assessment on the Lisbon Strategy is expected during the spring European Council (March 2005).
(6) The Dutch Presidency has called for structural changes in four policy areas: an effective redefinition of the relationship between working life and social/family life, the activation of the social security system and the promotion of changes at work, training and productivity.
3.1 The term (vocational) training means ‘The acquisition, refreshing or updating (by an individual) of mainly technical knowledge and skills’.  

3.2 Initial education and training relates to the stage of acquisition of initial basic knowledge and skills connected with the trade which the person will follow. Initial education and training is backed up in many Member States by apprenticeship, which links various forms of learning with company-related work experience.

3.3 Continuing vocational education and training/continuing professional development relates to learning relevant to the labour market or the company, based on already acquired skills and experience, in order to update and broaden knowledge and competence and acquire skills for other or new fields of work and operational tasks. Continuing vocational education and training is aimed first and foremost at citizens who are in active working life, i.e. who have an initial education and training, in some cases as semiskilled employees without a formal educational qualification, and are either in an employment situation or registered as unemployed (and in this connection take part in continuing vocational training promotion schemes or retraining courses). In addition it is open to all to take part in the many kinds of general and work-related training schemes on offer, which are available publicly or privately and in the most varied forms of learning.

3.4 European vocational training systems vary considerably from one Member State to another and show marked differences within each country, as they are constantly being adapted to the requirements of the professional and working world. It is a continuing challenge to find a precise and directly applicable definition of vocational training in terms of both interpretation and language. However, a generally important aspect is the composition of the vocational training on offer as between training establishments and company-based learning environments. The weighting can turn out differently in both initial and continuing vocational education and training depending on skills level, industrial sector and branch of work. The same applies to the type of training on offer, which can include seminars, modules and courses of varying duration as well as extended work-related study courses. In addition, the vocational training and qualification systems, and finally also training establishments and employers, recognise non-formal and informal learning processes (3).

3.5 The term lifelong learning means ‘all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective’ (4). As a result of the Lisbon Council conclusions, lifelong learning has acquired outstanding political significance as a key concept to meet the universally recognised need for a fundamental renewal of the European training model as part of the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society (5). A corresponding, consistent further development/ transformation of the structures, operation and teaching and learning methods of the present general and vocational education and training systems assumes a key significance for achieving the Lisbon objectives. In consequence, the new generation of Community action programmes for general and vocational education and training will be combined from 2007 under the overall heading of lifelong learning (6).

3.5.1 A practical, comprehensive realisation of lifelong learning remains in many respects still to be achieved, in terms of supply structures, access possibilities and social demand, but also as of percentage of population participating in its overall composition. The European agencies CEDEFOP and ETF have done a great deal to make it possible for the Member States in general and more specifically for the various interested parties and the appropriate players in the training field to exchange ideas, information and experience (7). In practice, however, a number of important questions remain, including:

— how lifelong learning can become an ‘umbrella’ for all learning processes (formal and informal).

(1) On the definition see SEC(2000) 1832 (Memorandum on lifelong learning) and COM(2001) 678 final (Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality).

(2) CEDEFOP publications provide more detailed information on the definitions in the field of vocational education and training; cf. in particular the CEDEFOP Glossary as well as the reports on vocational training research and vocational training policy (www.cedefop.eu.int and www.trainingvillage.gr). The appendix to opinion supplements these.

(3) This approach to problems – i.e. integrating the particular into the general - is moreover characteristic of the EESC’s work. Recent opinions OJ C 110 of 30.4.2004 (Hornung-Draus-Greif) and OJ C 117 of 30.4.2004 (Ribbe-Ehnmark) are good examples of this.


(7) Cf. relevant CEDEFOP publications under the general heading ‘Getting to work on lifelong learning’ (www.trainingvillage.gr) and relevant ETF studies and reports on the situation in the new Member States and candidate states (www.etf.eu.int).
— how it can be linked with the building of a knowledge-based society and economy;

— how it can be linked with sustainable development and the contemporary challenges of globalisation;

— more particularly, how it can become an instrument of local productive, social and cultural development;

— how a European area of lifelong learning can be developed;

— how its various results can be capitalised on and validated;

— finally, how it can be financed.

3.6 In formal terms, according to the Commission, productivity of work (1) signifies the amount of work needed for the production of a specific unit. From a macro-economic standpoint, productivity of work is measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country per active member of the population (2). Increasing productivity is the most important source of economic growth (3).

4. The vocational training policy of the European Union

4.1 The Union ‘shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and complement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training’ (4). The Copenhagen decisions of 2002 mark a qualitative forward step in the further development of this policy, which also works towards consistency and synergy with the Lisbon agenda on general education and vocational training by 2010 (5). The Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe (April 2004) (6) is another step in the same positive direction.

4.1.1 The European agencies CEDEFOP and ETF support the development of vocational education and training in a specific way. In particular they contribute to the implementation of European vocational training policy guidelines by outlining, disseminating and exchanging information, experience and examples of good practice, through commissioned studies and reports and through the preparation and analysis of relevant research work and accounts of practical experience. The European information network Eurydice (7) links up the systems and players of the general education systems in a similar way. These three organisations work together in constructive cooperation, the extent of which is constantly increasing with the growing importance of lifelong learning, which brings with it increasing cooperation and integration between general and vocational education and training.

4.1.2 The Leonardo da Vinci programme (8) is intended to implement the Union’s policy in the field of vocational training. It contributes to ‘the promotion of a Europe of knowledge by developing a European area of cooperation in the field of education and vocational training’ and supports ‘Member States’ policies on lifelong learning and the building up of the knowledge and skills and competences likely to foster active citizenship and employability’ (9). The Member States are responsible for carrying out the programme.

4.1.3 In the context of the development and implementation of lifelong learning, special attention should also be paid to the ‘Grundtvig’ action in the current Socrates II programme, concerned with promoting an integrated educational approach over the whole spectrum of adult education (10).

(1) See SCADPlus: Productivity: the key to the competitiveness of European economies and enterprises. Apart from the term ‘productivity of work’ other relevant terms are also used, with slightly different meanings. They include: productivity of the economy, productivity of the enterprise, national productivity, individual productivity, productivity of capital etc.

(2) See COM(2002) 262 final (Summary) and SCADPlus: Productivity: the key to the competitiveness of European economies and enterprises.

(3) Cf. COM(2002) 262 final (Summary) and SCADPlus: Productivity: the key to the competitiveness of European economies and enterprises.

(4) Article 13-183 of the Draft Constitution. The Union’s responsibilities with regard to vocational training are determined by the phrase ‘The Union shall implement a vocational training policy’. With regard to education, they are determined by the phrase ‘The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education ...’


(7) www.eurydice.org


(10) http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/grundtvig/overview_en.html
4.2 The national general and vocational education and training systems were structured and developed essentially to meet the specific needs created over time and on a case-by-case basis by the labour market. As a result their development followed cycles of intensification and slowing corresponding to those of that market. For the same reason, there are significant differences among them. These differences are now giving rise to problems of coordination, assimilation of relevant best practice and mutual comprehension of the terms and concepts used in each case.

4.3 The expenditure of the European Union on vocational training amounts in 2004 to EUR 194 533 900, of which EUR 163 million for the Leonardo da Vinci programme. In comparison, the expenditure on culture of all kinds and levels except education and training amounts to EUR 268 848 500; the total budget of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture is EUR 783 770 054, out of a total Community budget of EUR 92 370 071 153 (1).

4.4 Moreover, it should be pointed out that the average percentage of EU citizens undergoing continuing vocational training is low (8.4 %) (2). The Union's objective for 2010 is to raise this percentage to 12.5 % of the potential active population (25-64 age group) (2).

4.5 Efficient, forward-looking continuing vocational training is an integral part of the successful practical implementation of lifelong learning. It is clear that the present systems, together with their learning processes and results, do not meet the requirements either quantitatively or qualitatively. This overall judgment does not exclude the possibility of exceptions in specific branches and contexts where there are high-quality, effective continuing vocational training opportunities. One example could be courses organised within a specific enterprise to cover its specific needs; another could be sectoral training opportunities (5), which have been developed by the European social partners or in cooperation with them.

5. The European Union's policy on raising productivity

5.1 All the data from relevant European Commission studies in recent years show that developments in the field of productivity are negative for the Union. During the second half of the 1990s, and following a period of substantial slowdown, the United States saw an acceleration in both labour productivity growth (from an average of 1.2 % in the period 1990-95 to 1.9 % in the period 1995-2001) and in employment growth (from 0.9 % to 1.3 %). In the EU, growth in labour productivity slowed down (from an average of 1.9 % in the first half of the decade to 1.2 % in the period 1995-2001) but employment growth picked up considerably (from a decline of 0.6 % in the first half of the decade to 1.2 % in the period 1995-2001) (7).

5.2 It is clear that there are considerable differences between the productivity rates of individual EU Member States. The European Commission, in its Communication entitled Productivity: the key to the competitiveness of European economies and enterprises (6), endeavours to show the causes and effects which this situation can have on the Lisbon objectives. After identifying and explaining the considerable differences between Member States in this respect, the Communication points out that: "Economic growth will increase only if productivity rises. Improvements in enterprise productivity depend heavily on progress in ICT and innovation, and a labour force better adapted to the needs of industry (7)."

(1) The budget of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture amounts to 0.85 % of the Union's total budget. The amounts allocated for training account for 0.25 % of the budget of the Directorate-General for Education and Culture and for 0.002 % (0.003 for education of all other types and levels) of the Union's total budget (all the figures are derived from or based on the General Budget of the Union for 2004).

(2) In a relevant Eurostat survey (CVTS 2/Data 1999/Edition 2002) extremely important comments are made on the quantitative and qualitative elements of training at sectoral level in a sample of Member States.

(3) The original Commission proposal read as follows: 'By 2010, the EU average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 15 % of the adult working age population (25-64 age group) and in no country should it be lower than 10 %'. This proposal was finally amended by the Council on 5 May 2003 as described above (source: http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c11064.htm).

(4) Training at sectoral level appears to be of particular importance for acquiring international skills and competences. The players at this level are close to the problems and challenges arising from globalisation and the development of new technologies, and are in a good position to propose and develop solutions (Leonardo da Vinci – EAC/11/04, III).

(5) COM(2002) 262 final, point 2 (second paragraph)

(6) COM(2002) 262 final

5.3 The EESC believes that greater productivity in the Union is the key to its overall future. It also considers that all attempts to increase productivity must take place within the framework and with the support of the European social model. Such efforts must be directed towards, and embraced by, all European citizens, they must be geared to medium- and long-term development, be systematic and be determined by a knowledge-based policy and action mix. Lastly, the Committee is convinced that cooperation between the social partners and, more widely, civil society and the public authorities – especially at local level – has a vital role to play in carrying out these measures.

6. The relationship between training and productivity

6.1 More generally, in the EESC’s view, the following must be clarified with regard to the particular issue in question:

— Productivity is influenced decisively, albeit in part, by knowledge: ‘Issues such as level of investments, workplace organisation, participation policies, the creation of innovation-stimulating working milieu, new forms for university-enterprise cooperation, new forms for making available risk capital should be part of a wider approach towards productivity growth in the European Union.’ (1). Productivity growth is therefore not achieved simply by improving the training system.

— In today’s circumstances, training can effectively influence productivity – and hence competitiveness and the achievement of the Lisbon objectives - to the extent that it is part of a wider and general framework of education policy (2). This wider framework must include a basic but nonetheless operational internal communication system (at regional, national and Community level), must consider all forms of education and training as sub-components of lifelong learning and, finally, in terms of objectives and content, must be structured and geared towards an environment characterised by a high degree of multi-dimensional mobility (3).

— Productivity and training must be examined and linked at all levels including the workplace level where most of the decisions on financing and access to CVT are taken. They must also be examined and linked collectively, even if at first sight problems seem to be individual.

— In any case, support from the Union for those of its regions which are lagging behind in developing modern forms of training, and in particular for the new Member States, is highly important.

6.2 Against this backdrop, the systems and initiatives of initial vocational education and training, and even more continuing vocational education and training/professional development, should be developed to operate more efficiently than in today’s circumstances (4).

6.2.1 The creation today of a modern system for updating knowledge, skills and qualifications requires an unprecedented combination of guidelines, knowledge, targets, operational framework and incentives. More specifically, the following are necessary:

— familiarisation with the new global dimensions (including planning, economic, technological, cultural and demographic aspects);

— sound general and specialist knowledge geared to the rationale and way of working of the global market and the new forms of global political and economic governance;

— sensitivity to the needs and demands of society and the knowledge-based economy, through the development of innovative, attractive and flexible programmes;

— awareness of the new fault lines revealed by the new global production system and the need to develop counter-measures to overcome them;

— redefinition of the form and structure of competition as a path to mobility and innovation both within and beyond the Union;

— redefinition of the incentives to take part in training, in particular by specifying how the added value generated by training should be distributed;

— awareness of the three dimensions of the concept of sustainability and its advancement in personal and collective life. (5)

(1) See point 4.4 of opinion OJ C 83 of 8.4.2003 (Sirkeinen-Ehmann).
(3) The main problem of European vocational education and training systems today is that they do not reflect the current climate: while the latter is extremely mobile, the former operate as a rule as if in conditions of dead calm.

(4) For further details, see Eurostat, Continuing vocational training survey (CVTS2) Data 1999. See also the data in the Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe (2004/C 104/01).
(5) See point 7.2.3.
6.2.2 The conditions mentioned above cannot be met in all forms and types of vocational training, whether continuing or not. They form a part of systematic education measures (1), influenced by several aspects and designed (learning + teaching) to lead in the longer term to a culture of education (socialisation) in which knowledge appears as a driving force of progress and synergy appears as an effective force for sustainable development.

6.3 In the Committee’s view, a reasonable response to the first two questions posed by the Dutch Presidency would be the following:

6.3.1 With the present nature and mode of operation, European vocational training systems at the initial stage and continuing training have difficulties meeting the requirements of the knowledge society and sustainable economic development. Some of the particular problems these systems face include:

— General orientation: these systems have been and continue to be largely geared to resolving particular problems of an economic environment with little mobility.

— Level of action: in view of this general orientation, European vocational education and training systems must better integrate the particular into the general as part of a vision of the whole, as the globalisation of the economy now requires.

— System mobility: the orientation and level of action of these systems partially hampers all types of mobility, either internal or external, in terms of circulating new ideas, developing networks, fostering innovation and shaping policies responding to real problems.

— Contact with contemporary knowledge: regardless of the receptiveness and flexibility of individual training staff, the aforementioned systems continue as a rule to be exempt from any obligation to take on board developments in the scientific, technological, productive or any other field.

— Contact with developments in the labour market: education and training systems fail to meet the needs of the labour market as they rarely include certain of the newly-emerging specialities or broader social and interpersonal skills.

— Coordination: coordination of systems, in many Member States, encounters problems. This means that each distinct continuing vocational education and training system operates in isolation from the rest of the education system, from its counterparts in the European Union and, of course, in complete isolation from the surrounding economic and social situation.

6.3.2 Moreover, there are a number of gaps in strategic aims, means and educational practices which paralyse European educational and training systems. More specifically, these are:

— the practical implementation of lifelong learning should be pursued without delay, at all responsible levels of policy and practice;

— stronger social cohesion and more mobility are prime European educational goals and should be given corresponding priority in practical implementation by the responsible bodies and players;

— in many training courses the practical application is lacking, and employability suffers as a result;

— the content of training courses is often geared too closely to short-term market situations and hence leads in the long term to mistakes concerning labour market requirements;

— very serious barriers to mobility between the Member States persist because of incompatible training certificates and qualifications and insufficient knowledge of foreign languages.

7. Problems and assessments in the struggle for European productivity

7.1 These observations lead to the very serious assessment that efforts for productivity in Europe have concentrated on the wrong area and timescale. They should have focused on basic education and training, for the acquisition of key competences (2) while maintaining similar emphasis on lifelong learning (3), as defined above (point 3.5).

(1) See opinion – Appendix.

(2) Key/core competences: the sets of skills which are complementary to basic and generic skills and which enable individuals to acquire new qualifications more easily, to adapt to changing technological or organisational contexts, and/or to achieve mobility on the labour market, including by means of career development (source: Second report on vocational training research in Europe – executive summary – CEDEFOP publication).

(3) The European Council of 25/26 March 2004 includes the following in its Conclusions (point 39): ‘It also recognises that lifelong learning has positive effects on productivity and labour supply; it supports the adoption of an integrated EU programme during 2005 and the putting in place of national strategies in all Member States by 2006.’
7.2 The following proposals consequently refer to educational activities in their entirety – regardless of where responsibility for them lies – and form part of a single approach, requiring a major coordinated campaign to bring all European general and vocational educational and training systems into line with present-day European and worldwide conditions as quickly as possible. More specifically, the following are proposed:

7.2.1 **A more all-embracing and critical new approach to the structures and interrelation of European general and vocational educational and training systems.** This new approach will favour the development of a better level of communication and cooperation between the sub-systems of the various forms of education so that they can respond effectively to the challenges of globalisation and the mobility which it generates. It will be determined by an awareness of Europe’s perspective and participation in the above process of sustainable development.

7.2.1.1 It is strongly emphasised that the new approach must not damage the classical humanist dimension of the European educational and cultural identity. On the contrary, it must cultivate and promote that dimension.

7.2.1.2 In the context of this critical new approach, vocational training should neither acquire independent importance nor, of course, be dealt with in isolation. Like the related training fields, non-formal and informal learning processes, it will need to be embedded in an integrated lifelong learning network. This would be a system which meets citizens’ need and demand for general and vocational education and training and is directly and unrestrictedly linked with the great aim of sustainable development.

7.2.2 The EESC has a second position regarding the European perspective and participation in the above process of critical review of the new structures and interrelation of European general and vocational education and training systems.

7.2.2.1 The EESC considers that the scale of the problems, their urgency and, in particular, the considerable cost of resolving them, require immediate steps and research at European level.

7.2.2.2 The aim of such steps and research should certainly not be any type of Union intervention concerning existing structures in European general and vocational education and training systems: their diversity is a source of inestimable richness which should be boosted.

7.2.2.3 What they can offer is alternative forms and best practices for familiarising European general and vocational education and training systems with the new conditions and, in particular, pilot applications and innovative schemes to gear educational systems to the Lisbon objectives, to other major Union aims, and to methods for approaching, seeking, highlighting and exploiting the new, valid global knowledge.

7.2.2.4 In this context, and in particular with regard to productivity and what flows from it, the Union has a role, as always on the basis of the acquis communautaire – a role which it must emphasise and promote, especially at local and regional level.

7.2.2.5 There is a further and highly significant dimension to the Union’s participation in the critical review of the new structures and interrelation of European general and vocational education and training systems. It can substantially reduce the economic costs involved by seeking, identifying and promoting relevant new and best practices, on behalf of and in cooperation with the Member States. Lastly, by using the open method of coordination, it can also inject greater mobility and dynamism into the entire effort in order to achieve the common goals.

7.2.3 **The EESC’s third position concerns the way in which the learning process, of whatever type, can be tied in with the sustainability of economic, social and environmental policies.** This EESC position is the most complex and at the same time the most tangible. It is underpinned by relevant experience and can be considered as best practice.

7.2.3.1 This position is based on the principle that difficult problems, such as survival and sustainable development, productivity, competitiveness or the realisation of the knowledge society cannot be resolved at a distance from everyday reality, with isolated steps or choices from above. Nor can they be settled as individual problems with fragmentary actions. They are to be resolved by society, through integrated approaches and committed individual and collective involvement. This is why the EESC’s central proposal on the ‘how’ of productivity points beyond the European, national and sectoral level to the local level, integrated policies for sustainable development and vigorous reinforcement of all forms of cooperation between the social partners and, more broadly, between organised civil society and local authorities, in order to achieve common objectives.

(1) For further details, see the attached action plan for a local multi-purpose centre for learning, sustainable development and education.

(2) A typical positive example is the priorities set by the social partners at European level in March 2002, in the context of their efforts to promote the lifelong development of skills and qualifications, which should be supported.

(3) The European Council of 25/26 March 2004 includes the following in its Conclusions (point 43): ‘Support and advocacy for change must reach beyond Governments. In order to generate this support, the European Council calls on Member States to build Reform Partnerships involving the social partners, civil society and the public authorities, in accordance with national arrangements and traditions.’
7.2.3.2 The proposal highlights knowledge, know-how and innovation as a coherent subject for cooperation and for joint objectives, representing an aim of central importance.

7.2.3.3 The incentives of individual and corporate sustainability, familiarity with current activities at world level and, very importantly, mutual support for individual and collective developmental efforts, are suggested as a driving force to ensure that the proposal is workable.

7.2.3.4 The ideal tool for developing the proposal would be the establishment of lifelong learning – an institution which can be developed outside the existing rigidities of national education and training systems, and free of any polarisations of the kind created by the very nature of the internal competitive productive system.

7.2.3.5 In any case, and regardless of the services which lifelong learning may offer now or in the future as a comprehensive learning and educational system, a system of pressures and incentives (political and social) must be created immediately so that European educational and training systems can go on (1) to bring their own objectives into line with the Lisbon objectives. These objectives should, in particular, be geared to the following:

— the needs of the knowledge-based economy, the new economy and a globalised market;

— the needs of the labour market, as determined and developed under the influence of the sciences and technological options;

— the need to foster enterprise, a productive collective spirit, and social acceptance and accomplishment of innovation in general, and innovative productive activities in particular.

7.2.3.6 These above incentives should create a favourable and attractive climate for training and lifelong learning. A climate produced with the specific support of cooperation between educational institutions and, most of all, between educational institutions, companies, civil society and local authorities in promoting procedures and actions matching the Lisbon objectives.

8. Allocation of responsibilities and the question of financing

8.1 The allocation of responsibilities as part of a multilateral process to achieve common objectives – especially in the context of globalisation – is a complex issue involving both objective and subjective factors. These include:

— the recognition and acceptance by the parties involved of the operational framework;

— the recognition and acceptance of the common objectives and the need to achieve them;

— conditions affecting progress to achievement and balance in the process;

— incentives for achieving the specific objectives;

— the chances of the success of the entire project.

8.1.1 Against this backdrop, the participation of individuals, groups of individuals, enterprises or local communities in a process of initial or continuing vocational education and training – and even more of lifelong learning – depends on clarification of aims, means and incentives. The ensuing responsibilities do not therefore fall only to the players in the field of education and training. They also have political and social repercussions, and may be allocated as follows:

8.1.1.1 The political responsibilities concern in principle the creation of a smooth and transparent operating framework with regard to the conditions and limits of economic, social or any other form of operation. The development of relevant preventive policies, the reinforcement of selected forms of political and economic governance and the financing of such policies fall within the scope of political responsibilities.

8.1.1.2 The responsibilities of civil society, the social partners and local and regional authorities in promoting a comprehensive policy of lifelong learning, are also considerable. This basically concerns responsibilities regarding the popularisation of aims, ways and means for the creation of a learning environment. It also concerns responsibilities for devising specific types of cooperation and the necessary all-embracing actions. Lastly, it concerns responsibilities for formulating and ensuring incentives for participation in selected policies and actions, jointly agreed on a case-by-case basis.

(1) For more details, see a relevant study by the Federation of Greek Industries on the requirements of enterprises for the 2005-2007 period, which was unveiled in June (http://www.fgi.org.gr).
8.1.1.3 Corporate responsibilities have an economic and a social aspect. It is the task of companies to define the conditions and limits of their feasibility. Companies should also constantly weigh up their requirements in terms of skills and knowledge by conducting specialised training programmes, both individually and in cooperation with other nearby producers. This applies of course in particular to SMEs, who enjoy a closer link with their operating environment and are obliged to seek the advice and support of the social and economic environment in which they operate, since it is difficult for them to carry out complete educational actions by themselves. This point also illustrates the corporate social responsibility aspect. This dimension is all the more important in the context of economic globalisation, in terms of both the viability of companies themselves and of their social environment.

8.1.1.4 Lastly, individuals bear a range of responsibilities regarding their involvement in a lifelong learning process. They affect changes in points of view, ways of looking at present events and facts, in links with learning and knowledge and changes to the way of life as a whole and to the way free time is organised and used. In consequence, and particularly in the case of older working people, the responsibilities for them to take part in lifelong learning processes must be accompanied by specific obligations and more substantial incentives. This combination of obligations certainly includes the use by individuals of their free time, as well as their share of the added value created by innovation and the new technologies.

8.2 The question of financing of training and, most of all, the financing of lifelong learning is also complex.

8.2.1 Under Article 14 of the European Union’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, every citizen of the Union has ‘the right to education and to have access to vocational continuing training’. It must therefore be a public task – for all levels and bodies collectively – to create the preconditions for safeguarding these rights. Guaranteeing the necessary funds is an essential part of this task.

8.2.2 However, beyond this state obligation, the driving force for viability will in general come fundamentally from the competitiveness of the economy – especially towards the exterior – and from the cooperation built up in this connection.

8.2.2.1 Public responsibility for the funding of education in no way excludes the joint responsibility of employers and companies. This joint responsibility does not relate generally to the field of vocational training, nor to qualification and continuing training courses, but to training courses offered within the company with the aim of providing skills specifically useful to that enterprise. Companies need to provide continuous training for their workers so that they can meet the challenge of technological and organisational modernisation and the need for expansion. To this end, both the companies and the workers must be helped and strengthened through incentives agreed and proposed by the social partners. Such incentives have already been referred to by the social partners in the 2004 second joint report on follow-up, in the context of efforts to promote lifelong development of skills and qualifications. The second point of the first chapter of that report reads: ‘National reports illustrate the variety of instruments used by social partners in order to mobilise resources to promote efficient investment in the lifelong competence development. Some instruments are put in place in cooperation with public authorities, be they European or national (use of EU funds, tax incentives, creation of new funds, etc.). Some instruments are more specifically geared towards individual resourcing of competence development’.

8.2.2.2 At all events, investments in competition-related learning and knowledge acquisition should be seen in the context of long-term productive partnerships between local, regional, national and sectoral players and bodies. Such investments are not confined to support for public spending, but bring in a range of resources of varied origin. Taken together all resource applications, expenditure and activities contribute to the long-term process of improving skills.

8.2.3 The fundamental public education task, which also applies in the vocational training field, also calls for a differentiated, case-by-case approach. First of all, certain EU regions and population groups need special economic support, and secondly certain sectors and industrial branches – not least SMEs – deserve special attention.

8.2.3.1 Bodies which fund training at all levels should regard it as important to favour innovation and to develop a heightened sensitivity to operational realities – particularly where SMEs are concerned.

8.2.3.2 Such a case-by-case approach to the funding of lifelong learning in practice should of course respect transparency and start at the right level, i.e. with the cooperation and consent of the social partners and civil society.

8.2.4 The EESC emphasises the urgent need for more rational distribution of resources in connection with the financing of training and lifelong learning. This applies both to the way such resources are allocated and to their impact as investments.
8.2.4.1 The EESC proposes that a high-level report be drawn up, based on relevant research, and including:

— a list of financial resources and means for training and lifelong learning at all levels;

— an assessment of their level of quality;

— an assessment of how they tie in with official school systems;

— analyses and comparisons of their impact as investments.

8.2.4.2 This research would also serve to reveal issues which are at present hidden. It would also certainly reveal instances of good practice, which could lead to a roadmap of general guidelines for the development of training from now on, with the consistent aim of a comprehensive system of lifelong learning.

9. An example of best practice: a comprehensive process of sustainable development at local level

9.1 ADEDY – a third-level trade union of Greek civil servants – recently conducted a programme on lifelong learning, entitled ‘Lifelong learning as an individual right in the context of the European social model for the 21st century’. The programme, which was co-funded by DG Education and Culture, took place over a two-year period and was completed in January 2004, and was implemented across a sample of three geographically diverse regional administrations in Greece (Kozani, Kalamata/Messinia and Khalkida/Evvia).

9.2 The initiative set out to increase the awareness of regional trade union officials and, more generally, of regional members of civil society organisations and local authorities, regarding the need to forge local forms of cooperation in working towards the Lisbon objectives, with lifelong learning as the means for bringing this about.

9.3 Regarding the results of the initiative, common frameworks for action (1) were decided unanimously in all three cases, with the following main features:

— Recognition of the new political, technological, social and cultural operating framework being forged day-by-day by economic globalisation and contemporary technological progress;

— Acceptance of cooperation at local level between local administrations and organised civil society as the basis for tackling the operational problems thrown up by new conditions and for the joint achievement of agreed specific and realistic objectives for sustainable development;

— Use of the institution of lifelong learning as a tool for sustainable development (in economic, social and environmental terms), and as an instrument for creating and acquiring reliable global knowledge;

— To this end, the foundation and operation of a Multifunctional Centre for Learning, Sustainable Development and Education, in appropriate cases.

10. Recommendations

10.1 The EESC, in the context of its more general view of the essence of the productivity problem today, its understanding of the limits of education and training, but also its awareness of what is feasible at present, would point out the following to the Dutch Presidency with regard to continuing training:

10.1.1 In theory continuing training is intended for adults. Up to only a few years ago it successfully covered the needs for simple skills, at times and in sectors where related technological developments were taking place. This explains why this form of training has developed more in the secondary sector of production.

10.1.2 In the present economic situation technological and other developments are moving at a faster pace, clearly have greater scope, and above all are more all-encompassing. Monitoring and assimilating them require not just skills, but capacities (2). As a result continuing training as provided today is an inadequate and perhaps ineffectual enterprise. It attempts something inappropriate to it and which cannot be satisfactory.

(1) The last framework for action, from the Evvia (Khalkida) region, appears in appendix (available in Greek and English only). The other two frameworks are of similar content.

(2) Capacity: the proven ability of a person to make the most of his or her know-how, skills, qualifications or knowledge so as to manage successfully both familiar and new vocational situations and requirements (source: Second report on vocational training research in Europe – executive summary – CEDEFOP publication)
10.1.3 In parallel with the pace of technological developments, their scope has created training requirements of a modern nature for workers of a much broader age range and in all production sectors. There has been an attempt to meet these requirements in part through training practices of earlier times, but without much result because they did not satisfy objective modern needs. An exception to this has been certain efforts by the social partners at sectoral level.

10.1.4 This, then, is the point reached with continuing training in Europe at present: a point where it is in great need of development and where this need cannot be met for reasons of infrastructure, culture and/or lack of relevant best practice and experience.

10.1.5 Tackling the above situation presupposes a new approach to:

— what continuing training means today;

— whom it concerns (age groups and sectors);

— how it can be developed more effectively;

— how it can be financed.

10.1.5.1 The replies to the first two questions are of a theoretical kind and have already been answered in the context of the Lisbon Agenda, lifelong learning and the objective of a knowledge-based society and economy. However, the third question has not yet been answered. The European Council (1) repeatedly took decisions intended to create the necessary mobilisation to fulfil the relevant – in some cases detailed – commitments, but without significant results.

10.1.6 The Europe-wide networking of many enterprises and the mobility of workers call for a European dimension in vocational policy. Despite all the differences in their educational systems, the EU Member States must regard themselves as forming a ‘training area’. The following points are of particular importance to the EESC:

— inclusion of continuing training as a post-school learning procedure in an integrated EU programme of lifelong learning for immediate application (2), against the background of the formulation of European training objectives, which while respecting responsibilities can make suggestions for forward-looking reforms of national vocational training systems, taking into account the promotion of employability; a central aim of the above programme must be to support the European dimension of lifelong learning and to link basic vocational education with the need for constant updating of knowledge;

— operational and creative linkage and inclusion of the said programme in the pursuit of the major objective of sustainable development;

— making this link as decentralised and individualised as possible, in the context of European guidelines, relevant national strategies and, above all, of cooperation between civil society and the public authorities as well as with the whole educational world;

— making the greatest possible use, to this end, of the social partners and especially of the relevant cooperation agreements between them at the European, national, local and sectoral level;

— strengthening and making the most of relevant cooperation, at the essentially local level, between the public authorities and civil society;

— gearing the content of training courses both to assumed labour market requirements and to making the training content as broad as possible;

— making lifelong learning easier by defining the educational objective of learning qualifications; these are the best guarantee of employability;

— greater communication of economic knowledge as early as the secondary schooling level, and education producing well-rounded personalities, and especially in personal responsibility, critical faculty and self-reliance;

— enhancing employability through apprenticeship (practically relevant learning e.g. in enterprises);

— the learning of foreign languages to facilitate mobility and exchange between Member States should be intensified at all levels;

(1) A typical sentence is found in point 10 of the Conclusions of the 25 and 26 March 2004 meeting: ‘The European Council agrees that the critical issue now is the need for better implementation of commitments already made.’

(2) The Conclusions of the same European Council meeting include this position: ‘It also recognises that life long learning has positive effects on productivity and labour supply; it supports the adoption of an integrated EU programme during 2005 and the putting in place of national strategies in all Member States by 2006.’
— the specific training of human resources staff, especially of older staff, with a view to good leadership of the firm and workers by setting up initial and continuing training plans in the firm;

— greater efforts to harmonise, and ensure mutual recognition of, vocational training certificates and vocational qualifications.

10.1.7 The above perspective of strengthened European educational cooperation to deal in an overall and unified way with the delay which exists in the approach to the Lisbon goals presupposes the following specific political choices:

— sufficient resources to cover the range of different workers and the depth of the training that would be involved;

— finding the necessary teaching staff on a European scale;

— shaping a modern learning framework and environment;

— awareness, active presence and participation of administrations at all levels, the social partners and civil society in general;

— clearer definition of the roles and responsibilities attaching to any beneficiaries of educational initiatives, their suppliers, and the arrangements for monitoring all initiatives at local, national and European level;

— and lastly, intensive mobilisation to promote the whole initiative and the implications of its content and objectives.


10.1.8 In the EESC’s view the more difficult problems in implementing the above proposal concern funding and making the local forces (public authorities and civil society) operationally available.

10.1.8.1 In an earlier opinion, the EESC stated that ‘Investments of European interest designed to achieve the objectives set in Lisbon should be excluded from the calculation of the public deficit’ (1). In the above context, the funds allocated for lifelong learning would in the EESC’s view have a positive effect both on the construction of a knowledge-based Europe and on the promotion of sustainable development.

10.1.8.2 Transferring the focal point of lifelong learning and sustainable development to the local level would liberate new energies, create greater mobilisation and make the whole process more transparent.

10.1.8.3 A more concerted, comprehensive and effective procedure for shaping, promoting and monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of European decisions on education would pave the way for dramatic progress in making up the ground the Union has lost in terms of productivity and in achieving the Lisbon objectives.

10.1.8.4 Lastly, greater use and better coordination of the conventional arenas of educational activity – family, school and work – would boost such progress. A boost of this kind is absolutely essential to attaining the major challenge of making the Union the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND

(1) See point 5 of opinion OJ C 110 of 30.4.2004 (rapporteur: Ms Florio).