

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment’

COM(2010) 682 final

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The European Commission decided on 23 November 2010 to consult the European Economic and Social Committee under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment

COM(2010) 682 final.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 June 2011.

At its 473rd plenary session, held on 13 and 14 July 2011 (meeting of 13 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 130 votes to 1 with 6 abstentions.

Preamble

- The EESC opinion on the Agenda for new skills and jobs is part of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.
- The EESC opinion stresses a new holistic approach: in other words, it judges the Agenda for new skills and jobs in close relation to the other flagship initiatives and five horizontal objectives at EU level.
- In this connection, the EESC opinion stresses the need for coherence between policies at EU level and at national level, as well the impact and key role of non-governmental stakeholders.

1. Conclusions and proposals

1.1 The Committee shares concern about the impact of the global economic crisis on how the labour market is operating and broadly welcomes the **Agenda for new skills**: A European contribution towards full employment as an effort by the Commission to help increase employment and make labour markets more efficient. It calls on Member State governments to put the social dialogue and dialogue with organised civil society to good effect as they seek ways and means to improve the situation.

1.2 The Committee regrets, however, that the proposed initiative fails to encapsulate the **urgent need** to create good-quality jobs and is not a sufficient stimulus to Member States to

set more ambitious national goals backed by structural reforms and investment policies designed to secure real growth and new job opportunities.

1.3 The Committee appreciates the fact that the agenda is rooted in the notion of flexicurity and underscores the need to strike the **right balance between internal and external flexicurity in the interests of both a more efficient labour market and protection of workers**. The Committee recommends that an analysis be made of the state of affairs at the outset and that the implementation of flexicurity policies continue to be monitored and evaluated, with the emphasis falling on the role of the social partners in this process, the aim of which should be to continue to facilitate reintegration and transition in the labour market.

1.4 The Committee welcomes the bundling of education and employment policy in a single strategy document. Nevertheless, it fails to detect a link between improving and updating skills and a growth in labour productivity.

1.5 The Committee welcomes the Commission’s endeavour to offer new instruments and initiatives, but recommends, nevertheless, that their linkage and synergies with existing instruments be strengthened. The EESC believes that the Commission – in looking into the role of non-binding instruments – must respect the mutual compatibility of policies and initiatives adopted at EU level. It also thinks that a coherent proposal to re-examine EU legislation in the social sphere should support rather than weaken the efforts of Member States to implement beneficial labour market reforms and promote social investment.

1.6 The Committee recommends that the Commission take on board, when considering reopening discussion on the quality of jobs and working conditions, the mixed outcomes of the fifth EUROFOUND survey of working conditions in Europe.

1.7 The Committee underscores the need to use European funds more effectively and joins the Commission in calling on the Member States to target the European Social Fund and other funds at the four basic goals listed in the Commission communication in order to help meet the Agenda objectives and national goals under the Europe 2020 strategy.

2. Presentation

2.1 On 23 November 2010, the European Commission presented the Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment, which draws on a series of earlier initiatives to raise and forecast skills in the EU and better match them to labour market needs. The Committee responded to these initiatives in an earlier opinion ⁽¹⁾.

2.2 However, the Commission's new agenda is broader in scope, pursues the commonly agreed goal of 75 % employment in the European Union for men and women between the ages of 20 and 64, and lays down significant steps in four key areas:

- better functioning labour markets;
- more skilled workforce;
- better job quality and working conditions;
- stronger policies to promote job creation and demand for labour.

2.3 The Agenda for new skills and jobs draws on the general principles of flexicurity adopted by the Council in 2007 ⁽²⁾. The aim of the flexicurity policy is primarily to increase adaptability, employment and social cohesion. Flexicurity policies – largely by introducing subsidised measures to offer training and reduce working time – helped to a certain extent to weather the crisis, but vulnerable groups are still in a serious situation.

2.4 For this reason, the Commission is now coming forward with a new initiative to reinforce all four flexicurity components (flexible and reliable contractual arrangements, active labour market policies, comprehensive strategy on life-long learning, and modern social security systems) and their implementation. Member States' national flexicurity arrangements must be strengthened and adapted to the new socio-economic context, through a new balance between each of these four elements.

2.5 In its agenda, the Commission sets out thirteen key actions backed by twenty support measures aimed at reducing segmentation and facilitating transitions on labour markets, giving workers the skills they need to get jobs, improving working conditions, supporting the creation of new jobs, and making better use of EU financial instruments.

3. General comments

3.1 The January 2011 report on employment in the EU ⁽³⁾ states that: 'The labour market in the EU has continued to stabilise and there are now signs of recovery in some Member States. (...) Nevertheless, at 221,3 million people, employment was by then still down by 5,6 million people when compared to its peak in the second quarter of 2008, reflecting marked declines in manufacturing and construction. The employment of workers aged 20 to 64 also stood at 208,4 million people corresponding to an employment rate of 68,8 %. (...) Unemployment now stands at 23,1 million persons. Long-term unemployment is increasing across all the population groups, although to a different extent. Of these almost 5 million were unemployed for 6 to 11 months. The crisis has aggravated the risk for the low-skilled and non-EU migrants.' Despite the progress made, the report finds the situation of labour markets to be still uncertain. OECD figures from May 2011 put unemployment in the euro area at 9,9 % ⁽⁴⁾.

3.2 For this reason, the European Economic and Social Committee continues to share the concern about the functioning of the labour market and in general welcomes the Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment as an effort by the Commission to increase employment, boost job quality and improve the functioning of labour markets in line with the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Employment Strategy and the Employment Guidelines. It stresses the role of the social partners and thinks that Member State governments should make better use of the social and organised civil society dialogue on this matter so that they can propose and implement the kind of measures that contribute effectively to improving the situation.

3.3 The Annual Growth Survey ⁽⁵⁾ published in January 2011 at the commencement of the European Semester showed that the Member States are lacking in ambition when setting their national goals and will fail to meet their common targets on employment (75 %) by 2 to 2,4 %. The Committee believes that policies to achieve the proposed goals should take on board the conclusions of the **Dialogue on Growth and Employment in Europe** meeting held in Vienna in March between representatives of the IMF, the ILO and the social partners ⁽⁶⁾.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 128/74, 18.05.2010.

⁽²⁾ Council conclusions on Towards Common Principles of Flexicurity, 5-6 December 2007 (16201/07).

⁽³⁾ Joint Employment Report, COM(2011) 11 final, Brussels, January 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/3_en_annexe_part1.pdf.

⁽⁴⁾ OECD Harmonised Unemployment Rates, News Release, 10 May 2011, www.oecd.org.

⁽⁵⁾ Annual Growth Survey, COM(2011) 11 final, 12.01.2011.

⁽⁶⁾ www.ilo.org: Dialogue on Growth and Employment in Europe, held on 1-3 March 2011 in Vienna.

3.4 The EESC regrets that the Commission is only reacting with standard measures to such a pressing situation and that the proposal submitted lacks any stress on supporting growth factors that could stimulate job creation. It is not enough for people to remain active and acquire the right skills to get jobs: the recovery must be based on growth and job creation.

3.5 What Europe needs above all, in order to take on the challenges it faces, is a return to lending, investing and carrying out structural reform. The tangible action needed to remove the obstacles to creating jobs and boosting productivity has to be mapped out. One of the things productivity depends on is the quality of jobs. Many of these reforms, which should be as consensus-based as possible, have to be carried out at national level. The Member States must realise that they need to encourage business and household lending, make productive investments and carry out effective reforms in order to create jobs. The way to cope with fears of low and precarious salaries is to increase labour productivity and improve working conditions in Europe.

3.6 The Joint Employment Report also stresses the need to link employment policy, support for economic growth and fiscal consolidation (reaffirming the need to keep supporting vulnerable groups with high-quality social services and active inclusion strategies) and highlights the part played by a favourable economic environment and innovation-based economic growth in increasing labour demand.

3.7 The report also draws attention to a certain imbalance between job supply and demand in the course of 2010, which could indicate a mismatch between the skills of jobseekers and those skills required for the available jobs. This is why the report recommends this issue be carefully monitored to ascertain whether this is merely a passing trend or risks becoming structural.

3.8 The EESC notes that the Commission is not proposing any new legislation at this stage and that it acknowledges the role and added value of legally non-binding instruments as a complement to the existing legal framework. The social partners should be consulted on some of the initiatives, including the EU framework for restructuring, revision of health and safety at work legislation, the informing and consulting of workers, part-time and temporary work, and reopening the discussion on job quality and working conditions. Following these consultations, decisions would be taken on the suitability and implications of any changes that might be needed.

3.9 The Committee welcomes the Commission's endeavour to offer a series of new innovative initiatives and instruments to support the implementation of the new skills and jobs agenda. It thinks, however, that the interlinkage between new and existing instruments needs to be investigated to ensure the necessary synergies in their implementation. The strategy on

new skills should also take into account the transition towards a production model based on sustainable development and the greening of jobs.

3.10 In regions without a manufacturing industry, SMEs are crucial for creating opportunities both now and in the future. At the same time, these often provide high-quality jobs, are easily accessible and are able to improve the balance between family life, work, and care for other family members. The Small Business Act must be translated into tangible actions at national and EU level. For this reason, the measures in the agenda tailored to the specific needs of SMEs are welcome. Access to funding and removal of red tape remain the priority.

3.11 In the light of the findings of the third European Demography Report 2010 ⁽⁷⁾, which provides new facts about Europe's population, the Committee also welcomes initiatives geared to mobility, migration and integration in Europe. The EESC is convinced that maintaining internal EU mobility and immigration from third countries will help the EU to achieve positive economic results. Economic migration into the EU and easier mobility between Member States are essential if the Union is to remain an attractive location for business and investment, which delivers new job opportunities for citizens of both the EU and third countries. However, the principle of equal treatment must be respected in all of this ⁽⁸⁾.

3.12 Employment and labour market policies in Europe must continue to implement tangible measures to put the principle of non-discrimination in the workplace into practice and to ensure gender equality and the equality of all groups of workers. The Committee therefore welcomes the European Commission's strategies, published in 2010, which focused, among other things, on people with disabilities ⁽⁹⁾ and equal opportunities between men and women ⁽¹⁰⁾. Both strategies include the goal of equal access to the labour market, to education and to vocational training.

3.13 The Committee also appreciates the key actions and measures proposed in the Single Market Act ⁽¹¹⁾ to improve how we work, do business and trade together which reflect the important role of the social economy and the cooperative movement in the EU single market and the importance of corporate social responsibility. It also feels that the role of organised civil society organisations also needs to be taken into account, since these are also employers and create jobs. However, for their potential to be developed, it is vital that they are involved in policies.

⁽⁷⁾ <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/documents/Tab/report.pdf>.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 27/114, 3.02.2009 and CESE 801/2011, 4.05.2011.

⁽⁹⁾ COM(2010) 636 final: European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe, 15.11.2010.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015, COM(2010) 491 final.

⁽¹¹⁾ COM(2010) 608 final, Towards a Single Market Act, October 2010.

3.14 The Committee is deeply concerned by the high level of unemployment among the young in Europe, which has risen by 30 % since 2008. Average unemployment in the EU of young people below the age of twenty-five stands at 21 %. And, although the situation has tended to stabilise since September 2010 in some countries, whilst in others unemployment is still rising, the Committee still feels it continues to warrant special attention. The Committee has commented on the Commission's Youth on the Move initiative in a separate opinion ⁽¹²⁾.

3.15 Employment levels for people with disabilities in Europe remain low at around 50 %. If Europe really wants to ensure equal treatment for all Europeans at the same time as achieving its shared employment target, it has to get people with disabilities into good-quality paid work. The European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 pinpoints eight important areas for the EU still to tackle, including jobs, education and training for men and women with disabilities ⁽¹³⁾. The Commission could look into models in the Member States that might be used to support the legal, political, collective bargaining-related or financial incentives of companies, administrations and social services to employ these people. Given that ICTs currently represent 6 % of EU GDP, the digital strategy proposed by the Commission should have implications for everyone, especially in terms of training plans and the inclusion of social groups for which these technologies represent a catalyst for employment.

4. Flexicurity and job creation

4.1 The Agenda is based on the concept of flexicurity. The Commission highlights the need for comprehensive lifelong learning policies, active labour market policies that are effective in preparing people for work, in labour mediation, and in increasing the number of jobs available. Also needed are unemployment benefit systems that encourage labour mobility, guarantee greater social and occupational security and offer protection against social exclusion and poverty. The possibility of establishing flexible contractual arrangements and internal flexibility should be key aspects of the social dialogue. The EESC considers it important that any measures and policies adopted do not undermine efforts to achieve the aims set by the Agenda (including full employment and maintaining job quality) and do not jeopardise worker's labour rights.

4.2 The Committee has already taken the position in the past that it makes sense to assess job security and flexibility in tandem, since the two are not essentially incompatible. A stable and motivated workforce boosts the firm's competitiveness and productivity. Workers need more flexible working arrangements so that they can accommodate their family and working lives. They should have access to ongoing professional training that enables them to play a part in boosting productivity and innovation. However, the EESC stresses the need for scrupulous and regular monitoring of

flexicurity in operation as part of the social dialogue, in order to make sure that measures adopted really are effectively fulfilling the goals of creating more and better jobs.

4.3 Internal flexicurity proved its worth during the crisis, when companies and trade unions came up with practical ways to keep hold of jobs, especially using subsidised models for reducing working time. External flexicurity is important when the economy is in recovery, can help create new jobs, provided it is implemented in balance with internal flexibility and, more generally, with collective bargaining and adequate social protection for workers. Here, each Member State is starting from a different position. The most important thing is to get the right mix of policies. This is only possible if these policies are the fruit of social dialogue. The Committee finds that the application of internal and external flexicurity should be considered in a more balanced way in the annual recommendations from the Commission to the Member States.

4.4 The Committee notes that discussion on strengthening all four components of flexicurity will continue and culminate in a joint conference of all interested parties in 2011. The Committee agrees that a **new impetus on flexicurity** should be the result of a joint approach by European bodies, should be based on shared principles and should draw on real insight from the national level into how this notion actually helps in practice to create more and better jobs and whether it ensures adequate protection of workers, particularly those in a vulnerable position.

4.5 In this connection, the Committee welcomes the joint project of the European social partners under their multiannual work programme 2009-2011 ⁽¹⁴⁾, which addresses the ways that Member States put the flexicurity principle into practice and what role the social partners play in this process.

4.6 Economic growth remains the main lever to job creation. This is why the Committee sees a close connection between the Agenda for new skills and jobs and the Union's new strategic approach to innovation, the creation of the European research area and the creation of a competitive industrial base – and all of this using the full potential of the EU single market.

4.7 The Commission predicts, however, that economic recovery will be slow and that it could take longer for new jobs to be created. If the EU is to reach the target of 75 % employment and avoid jobless growth, it must realise the absolute necessity of identifying and implementing specific policies that, as part of the social dialogue, favour the recruitment and ongoing training of workers and flexible working arrangements and put job quality at the heart of flexicurity.

⁽¹²⁾ OJ C 132/55, 3.05.2011.

⁽¹³⁾ European Disability Strategy 2010-2020: A Renewed Commitment to a Barrier-Free Europe, COM(2010) 636 final.

⁽¹⁴⁾ The European Social Partners' Joint Study on The implementation of Flexicurity and the role of the social partners, carried out as part of the joint EU Social Dialogue Work Programme 2009-2011.

4.8 The EESC is aware that a well functioning labour market is key for Europe's competitiveness. The indicators for measuring progress should include long-term unemployment and youth unemployment rates and the labour market participation rate.

4.9 The Commission has proposed a **single employment contract**, the real effect of which is currently being hotly debated. In its opinion on the Youth on the Move initiative, the EESC argues that the single employment contract concept should be one of the measures to help narrow the gap between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' on the labour market. The EESC is aware here of the considerable differences between Member States regarding labour market access. Some of the rigid systems deny people any form of work, while in others short-term job contracts are offered that are unduly elastic and do not provide full access to welfare benefits. The EESC considers it important to point out that measures to be taken should ensure that people have stable job contracts that limit discrimination on the basis of age, sex or any other reason. However, the measures adopted should not lead to widespread employment precariousness or to greater rigidity in the way companies organise work. Companies need to have a repertoire of contractual arrangements so that they can adapt the labour force, while workers need flexibility to balance their working and family lives.

4.10 The EESC endorses the Commission's proposal to create **guiding principles to promote enabling conditions for job creation**, including the accompanying measures of **Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs** and familiarising teachers with issues relating to the entrepreneurial spirit. However, the Member States must translate these principles into tangible action in order to stimulate the hiring of workers, especially those with low qualifications ⁽¹⁵⁾.

4.11 The EESC also backs the creation of a **Tripartite Social Forum**, which met for the first time on 10/11 March 2011. The intention is to make this a standing platform for building trust between the social partners and policymakers.

4.12 **The European social dialogue** and collective bargaining at national level continue to be a crucial instrument for making labour markets more efficient and for improving working conditions.

In their autonomous agreement on inclusive labour markets ⁽¹⁶⁾, Europe's social partners recommend that the Member States create and implement multi-stranded policies to support labour markets that are accessible to all. Wherever possible, and respecting national specificities, the social partners must be involved at the appropriate level in measures that seek to address the following matters:

⁽¹⁵⁾ Current OECD surveys estimate that a cut in company contributions would boost employment by 0,6 %.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Autonomous Framework Agreement of the European Social Partners (2010) on inclusive labour markets, negotiated under the European Social Dialogue Work Programme for 2009-2011.

- the scope and quality of specific transitional measures for those encountering difficulties on the job market
- the effectiveness of employment services and career advice services
- education and training
- adequate investment in regional development
- adequate access to transport, care, housing and education
- facilitating business start-ups and further development in order to maximise the potential for job creation in the EU; furthermore, entrepreneurs should be able to invest in companies which are sustainable and which improve the environment
- creating the right conditions so that tax and contribution systems are geared to helping people get onto the labour market, stay on it and develop.

5. Giving people the right skills for work

5.1 The Committee welcomes the fact that matters of education are addressed along with labour market obstacles in a single strategy document.

5.2 The EESC has played its part in getting education recognised as a fundamental human right with several opinions in which it acknowledges that the main aim of education has been, and continues to be, to produce free and autonomous citizens capable of critical thought and of contributing to the development of society.

5.3 On the basis of the concept of education for inclusion, the EESC also recommends in a number of opinions ⁽¹⁷⁾ that the EU and the Member States undertake to revise (update) education policies, their content, approaches and structures and the allocation of resources, but also that a revision and/or up-dating of policies relating to employment, quality public services, attention to specific groups (children, people with special needs, migrants, etc.) be carried out, and that the gender perspective is included in all these policies.

5.4 The link between better worker skills and higher employment is incontrovertible. According to the Cedefop forecast, sixteen million jobs requiring higher qualifications will be created by 2020, while twelve million jobs calling for low or no skills will be lost. Nevertheless, the Committee regrets that, although the Commission acknowledges the importance of updating and improving skills, it fails to adequately stress the link between skills and productivity. Increasing productivity in Europe is essential, not least because of the dwindling labour force. The Committee also notes that the Commission is not proposing any new measures to improve the skills of workers

⁽¹⁷⁾ OJ C 18/18, 19.01.2011.

with low or no qualifications, nor is it looking for long-term solutions to support the participation of people who need targeted approaches in order to develop skills and achieve employment (e.g. persons with intellectual disabilities).

5.5 The Committee welcomes the EU skills Panorama, but thinks that the Agenda should lay greater emphasis on better matching skills to the needs of the labour market and on professional qualifications for workers in order to make them more employable. The Commission should not only take account of the formal systems for assessing skills. A good way of evaluating present and future skills demand is close collaboration between educational institutions, companies and trade unions.

5.6 In its opinion on Youth on the Move, the Committee supported the creation of a **European Skills Passport**. The Committee takes the view that 'the existing passports (Europass and the youth passport) should be combined into one overall instrument that would cover, on a single form, a traditional CV, formal education (Europass) and non-formal or informal education. [...] The success of the European Skills Passport will depend, amongst other factors, on how it is viewed by employers and used by young people, for whom the necessary advisory and support measures must remain available.'

5.7 The Committee thinks it of fundamental importance to draw up comprehensive lifelong learning strategies and therefore welcomes the drafting of the **European policy handbook**, which sets out a framework for implementing lifelong learning, and a renewed **action plan for adult learning**.

5.8 The Committee also supports other initiatives in preparation, such as the **Competences and Occupations classification (ESCO)** as joint platforms for work and for education and training, and **reform of systems for the recognition of professional qualifications**. It is particularly important to this end to review and adjust education models in Europe, review education systems, re-evaluate educational and teaching methods and make substantial investment in good education open to all. Education systems must be able to equip people to react to labour market challenges. Close collaboration with businesses is particularly important. The Competences and Occupations classification should be easier to understand and more user-friendly, especially for SMEs. The cataloguing exercise that is in the pipeline may constrain the flexibility needed to combine various skills in order to meet the constantly new or changing tasks that small companies have to perform with a limited number of workers.

5.9 The Committee highlights in particular the possible strategic role of the 'sector councils on employment and skills' when it comes to securing a better fit between skills and labour market needs. These are a unique platform for mobilising the hands-on experience of a range of the various social actors that make up these councils in, for example, the

analysis of future job opportunities and skills and cataloguing them (ESCO), or assessing the changes in some professional skills required for particular trades⁽¹⁸⁾.

5.10 The Committee welcomes the Commission's decision to work with Member States to examine the situation of highly mobile workers, especially researchers, with a view to facilitating their geographical and inter-sectoral mobility in order to complete the European Research Area by 2014.

5.11 It also welcomes the Commission's systematic endeavours to react to demographic changes and the lack of some skills in European labour markets by supporting legal economic migration under the Stockholm programme. The potential contribution of migration to full employment will be maximised if migrants already legally residing in the EU are better integrated, particularly through removing barriers to employment, such as discrimination or the non-recognition of skills and qualifications, which put migrants at risk of unemployment and social exclusion. The announced **New Agenda for Integration** will undoubtedly be a move in the right direction.

5.12 The Committee again stresses the importance of recognising the results of informal learning, as it has done previously in its Youth on the Move opinion, for example. Deliberations on the form such recognition could take should look at the quality of education and training and how these are monitored and supervised. Any measures to encourage the recognition of informal learning would be to everyone's benefit.

6. Improving the quality of work and working conditions

6.1 The Commission speaks in its communication of full employment as a goal. The criterion here is whether this means better quality of work and better working conditions.

6.2 The conclusions of the fifth EUROFOUND report on working conditions⁽¹⁹⁾ state: 'Ensuring quality of work and employment is a core element in achieving this objective' (the objectives of the 2020 strategy). The report also summarises a number of current trends in the European labour market. Among the positive points it reveals are that the standard forty-hour working week remains the norm for most workers and that, until 2007, when the global crisis erupted, the proportion of open-ended contracts had been rising. However, it also states that since then the temporary nature of jobs and the intensity of work has increased and that a large number of Europeans fear losing their jobs before reaching the age of sixty.

⁽¹⁸⁾ OJ C 132/26, 3.5.2011, OJ C 347/1, 18.12.2010 and OJ C 128/74, 18.05.2010.

⁽¹⁹⁾ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. Fifth report, www.eurofound.europa.eu.

6.3 The effects of the world economic crisis on the labour market will be with us for quite some time. For this reason, the Committee proposes that the Commission take on board, when considering reopening discussion on the quality of jobs and working conditions, the outcomes of the fifth EUROFOUND survey of working conditions in Europe (positive results, persisting problems and problems caused by the crisis).

6.4 The priority is to create good jobs. The Member States should embark upon reforming the labour market to boost growth and help create a balance between supply and demand.

6.5 From this point of view, the effectiveness analysis of EU social legislation proposed by the Commission should be targeted mainly at supporting the efforts of Member States to introduce reforms which are consistent with the priority of creating high-quality jobs.

6.6 Regarding the posting of workers directive, the EESC welcomes the Commission's endeavours to support its uniform and correct implementation, the bolstering of administrative cooperation between the Member States, the introduction of an electronic information system (the Internal Market Information System (IMI)) and the maintenance of Member States' labour standards, while respecting national labour law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

6.7 The intensity of work has risen sharply over the last twenty years. Studies from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, carried out under the Community strategy on health and safety at work, drew attention to new and future risks, such as work-related stress, musculoskeletal disorders, and violence and harassment in the workplace. Regarding review of legislation on health and safety at work, the Committee thinks this must be a matter for discussion and agreement with the social partners. The prime emphasis should be on the rigorous application of existing instruments, increasing awareness and helping workers and companies.

6.8 When it comes to action taken on consultation and information, the Committee endorses the scheduled consultation of Europe's social partners on the creation of an EU framework for restructuring. Such a dialogue will make it clear whether the current directives constitute an appropriate framework for constructive dialogue between management, trade unions and worker representatives at company level.

6.9 When it comes to reviewing directives on part-time work and fixed-term contracts, which are based on agreements between Europe's social partners and have so far been a useful instrument for increasing internal flexibility, the

Committee thinks that the Commission must ascertain whether Europe's social partners consider such a review to be necessary.

7. EU financial instruments

7.1 At a time of budget consolidation, the European Union and the Member States must concentrate on using EU funds better and give priority, within this policy, to creating job opportunities and improving qualifications. Cohesion policies undoubtedly help to advance skills and create jobs, including in the expanding green economy. There is still room for better capitalising on the potential of EU financial instruments that support reforms in jobs, education and training.

7.2 For this reason, the Committee supports the Commission in its appeal to the Member States to target the European Social Fund (ESF) and other funds at the four priorities mentioned in the communication and at the measures and reforms these may generate, thus helping to meet the agenda goals and national goals under the Europe 2020 strategy.

7.3 The crucial element here is the ESF, which will play a positive role in all the areas concerned. The ESF can contribute to supporting the individual pillars of flexicurity, to the forecasting and development of qualifications, to the development of innovative forms of work organisation, including health and safety at work, to facilitating entrepreneurship and company start-ups, and to helping workers with disabilities and some disadvantaged groups on the labour market or groups at risk of social exclusion.

7.4 The Committee's opinion on The future of the European Social Fund contains a series of recommendations⁽²⁰⁾. In it, the Committee states, among other things: 'Lessons must be drawn from the use of the ESF to support both the economic recovery and the economic growth of the European Union by improving support for SMEs, VSEs and social economy stakeholders, in accordance with ESF objectives, as well as through social improvements, both in terms of preserving and creating quality jobs and in terms of social inclusion, especially through work.'

7.5 Regarding the future EU budget, the same opinion has this to say: 'The ESF is the key instrument for supporting the implementation of the European employment strategy (...). In view of the current economic situation, therefore, the ESF must remain an important strategic and financial instrument and be given more resources to match the greater challenges it faces (higher rates of unemployment), reflecting the increase in the EU's general budget, namely at least by the 5,9 % proposed by the European Commission for the EU's 2011 budget as a whole.'

⁽²⁰⁾ OJ C 132/8, 3.05.2011.

7.6 The Committee welcomes the benefits and outcomes so far of the Union's PROGRESS programme implemented by the 2007–2013 strategic framework for jobs and social solidarity. It also welcomes the fact that the Commission, in revising its financial instruments, has launched a public consultation exercise that covers the structure, added value, action, budget and implementation of the instrument succeeding the PROGRESS programme, which should respond to the new challenges that the Union will be facing in the social and employment spheres.

Brussels, 13 July 2011.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON
