On 20 April 2012, the EESC Labour Market Observatory and the European Youth Forum (YFJ) held a joint conference on young people and the labour market entitled "Quality jobs for youth: Are we asking too much?"

In the first panel discussion, the EESC and YFJ presidents, Staffan Nilsson and Peter Matjašič, outlined the background and the approach taken by their respective bodies to the conference theme. Both agreed that youth unemployment was one of the most pressing problems facing Europe, and that the response to the current crisis should focus not solely on austerity measures but also on growth and job creation. The purpose of the conference was to put the question of youth unemployment on the agenda and to allow members of the EESC LMO and the YFJ to exchange views among themselves and with the panel speakers.

László Andor, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, referred to the recent Youth Opportunities Initiative and spoke in more detail about the Employment Package adopted by the Commission two days previously. He drew attention to three key innovations in the Employment Package compared with the European Employment Strategy: its focus was on the demand side, on a much more dynamic labour market and reinforced governance of employment policies. He singled out three of its actions: to implement a quality framework for traineeships by the end of 2012, to prepare a Council regulation to support Member States in setting up youth guarantee schemes, and to roll out a campaign entitled "Your first EURES job" to encourage young people to seek employment in another Member State. As the Commission could not print new money he felt it was very important to reallocate existing funds. Mr Andor saw the failure of training and education systems as one of the major causes of youth unemployment and stressed that the Commission clearly advocated dual training systems. He rounded off by repeating the need to address the demand side. As he put it "we cannot wait till after the crisis; we have to create jobs now".

During the debate the following issues were raised: the paradox that while, on the one hand, many measures are aimed at more education and training for young people, on the other, the current young generation is considered to be the best educated ever; the question of how to promote recognition of non-formal education; the lack of cooperation in Member States between education and employment...
ministers (and possibly a similar problem at European Commission level); the insufficient use of ESF funds; the excessive focus on market-oriented skills in education systems; the need to address youth unemployment as a structural as well as a crisis-related problem; the question of how the Commission supports national labour market reform efforts; and the issue of youth under-employment as a phenomenon that accompanies youth unemployment.

The second panel discussion involved three researchers, representatives from BusinessEurope and ETUC, an EESC member and the vice-president of YFJ.

Tito Boeri, Professor of economics at Bocconi University in Milan, focussed in a pre-recorded video message on three elements that would all contribute to solving the youth employment problem: reshaping social policies, and, in particular, unemployment benefit systems, to cover young people who had not yet fully entered the labour market, redesigning the open-ended contract, in such a way that new recruits gradually received more and more protection, and revising education systems to make curricula relatively short and based on dual learning.

Christian Brzinsky-Fay, researcher at WZB (Social Science Research Centre) in Berlin, presented the results of research on the link between labour market flexibility and the entry of young people into the labour market. It had indeed been a widespread assumption that labour market flexibility could facilitate the labour market entry of young people. However, his research did not confirm any such correlation. In fact, over the period under consideration, despite a general decrease in the employment protection level, relative youth unemployment and fixed-term employment in general had indeed increased. He concluded that relative youth unemployment seemed to be independent of labour market flexibility measures and more dependent on economic cycles.

Massimiliano Mascherini, research manager at Eurofound, addressed the issue of NEETs ("not in employment, education or training"). These young people were often not captured by traditional unemployment statistics. He quantified the phenomena. In the EU it was estimated that there were approximately 7.5 million NEETs in the 15-24 age bracket, and 6 million in the 25-29 age bracket, i.e. 13 million NEETs in total. Being a NEET had of course very damaging social consequences at a personal level and for society. Eurofound had estimated that the cost of NEETs amounted to EUR 120 billion per year.

Wolfgang Greif, EESC member, expressed his satisfaction that many EESC proposals were reflected in the Employment Package. He called for more funds and more streamlined access to existing funds. In this respect, he warned that conditionality could make it difficult, especially for some Member States, to use the funds. He felt that NEETs ought to be a specific target group in the national reform programmes. The EESC position was that precariousness had to be combated and replaced by a greater degree of security. In conclusion, he hoped that fiscal consolidation would not lead to increased poverty.

Robert Mahler, Chairman of BusinessEurope's Youth Taskforce, believed that the issue of youth unemployment needed lasting structural solutions rather than mere crisis-fighting measures. He
referred to the BusinessEurope Youth Taskforce which he had chaired and went through its main recommendations to the EU institutions (ensure funding for Member States wishing to establish or reform their dual learning systems and support campaigns for changing the perception of vocational education), to the Member States (provide a well-functioning general school system, promote dual learning apprenticeship systems, and integrate work-based learning in educational systems), to employers' organisations (take part in the governance of dual learning apprenticeship systems and inform and motivate companies to become involved in the dual system), and to companies (ensure a high level of quality of training which provides good earning potential and career opportunities and encourage employees to share their experience as former apprentices).

Bernadette Ségol, Secretary General, European Trade Union Confederation, agreed that without growth no job creation would be possible. In her view what was proposed now fell short of what was needed to rise to the huge challenge ahead. She admitted that in a way it was difficult to convince young people of the relevance of belonging to trade unions. This was partly due to the discourse of the last 30 years that neo-liberalism and flexibilisation would solve all problems. She stressed however that in the work programme of the European social partners for the years to come youth employment was the number one priority. She warned against the idea that lower wages for young people could be a means to labour market integration: a young person was not a half-human being or a half-worker. Finally, she saw a societal issue in all this. For 30 years the buzzwords had been neo-liberalism and flexibilisation. Wasn't it time to restore pride of place to the European social model?

During the debate the following issues were raised: youth unemployment must not be reduced to a question of more or less flexibility; the apparent paradox that Denmark, which is often considered the champion of flexicurity, has had a decrease in fixed-term employment; the fact that young women are more likely to be exposed to precarious working conditions than young men; the question as to whether trade unions are relevant to young people; the difficulty for companies in providing secure employment when they are themselves acting in a world of insecurity; and the need for the European Union to be more concerned about its young citizens than about its banks and finances.