

CSC of CEC – CCME – ECG Conference „Employment and the Churches“
CSC of CEC – COMECE – European Commission (BEPA)
Dialogue Seminar „Flexicurity from a Values Perspective“
Brussels, 27-29 February 2008

"Flexicurity, from a values perspective"

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth

Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation. On behalf of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers, and of the Commission, I would like to welcome you to this seminar.

Europe is facing a number of challenges which have a direct influence on our fellow citizens' daily life. Global competition and technological advances force enterprises to react quickly to a rapidly changing environment. This has a number of implications for Europe's labour markets: new jobs, new forms of contract, such as temporary work and labour agencies. As a consequence, there is a widespread perception of unstable jobs, uncertain income, and poor career prospects, especially among young people.

In this view, the flexibility demanded by companies is often perceived as opposed to workers' need for security. But the implications go beyond economic domains. The new modes of production and labour market tensions are also a threat for inclusive societies and the sustainability of our social systems. It is clear we have to come up with innovative policy approaches to respond adequately to these challenges.

The concept of flexicurity is, I believe, the right answer as it provides a possibility to find a right mix of measures, applicable to the specific circumstances of each Member State. Flexicurity is not about allowing enterprises to hire and fire, but it is

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about commitment, coordination and balance of rights and responsibilities for all stakeholders involved.

I will not go into the details of the flexicurity approach, but I will focus on that what I believe is central in this approach.

The structural changes in Europe's economies require new mindsets. We should move from the notion of job security to the notion of employment security. The decisive success factor in this shift is the ability to equip people with the right mix of knowledge and skills. This should help workers adapt to a changing environment and become more confident that they will be able to find a new job—or a better job if they are already in employment.

In this sense, education and training in a lifelong learning perspective empower people. I am convinced that this is the key consideration in any debate about our knowledge-based societies. The notion of lifelong learning fits perfectly the flexicurity model.

First, people should be aware that they need to update their skills throughout their lives. Second, we need to provide them with the right information and career guidance compatible with the needs of the labour market. And finally, we need to make sure that sufficient education and training opportunities are available for all.

I would like to insist on this last point. Equal opportunities for all are of paramount importance. Early school leavers, migrants, older workers and young unemployed have fewer chances to enter or re-enter the labour market. They should be the top priority in the education policies of all the countries and regions of Europe. The challenge begins already at the pre-primary level. There is evidence that efforts done at this stage bring the highest returns on investments in the future.

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Further, the skills acquired at school level determine to a large extent the adaptability that future employees will have to change. In a word, flexicurity begins at school. We at the European Commission support Member States in their efforts to ensure that initial education allow pupils to develop their key competences to a level that equips them for adult life.

Other considerations should be made for vocational education and training system. We have to make sure that training is designed to match the needs of the labour market and the personal development of workers. Thus, curricula development and training design should be done in co-operation not only with the social partners (employers and workers representatives), but also with those stakeholders providing social services and vocational training especially for those who are furthest from the labour market, namely churches and their diaconal organisations.

In this respect, partnerships between schools, companies, public authorities and other stakeholders providing training and social support, namely NGO and diaconal organisations for those who have high risk of exclusion from the labour market, are absolutely crucial.

This is much about the economy, but we cannot ignore personal, social and cultural aspects. As I said earlier, good education systems — from pre-school to doctoral programmes — are about empowering people; they are about social cohesion and mobility; they are about solidarity and inclusion—values that we hold dear.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me tell you that we cannot be satisfied with the current level of skills in Europe. Although the unemployment rate has been decreasing in the last years, we still have around 17 millions of unemployed people. At the same time, we face skills shortages in certain sectors and industries. The latest figures on participation in lifelong learning show that we are still far from reaching our goal of 12,5% in 2010 (2006 – 9,6%).

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Many countries have not yet implemented comprehensive lifelong learning strategies and systems. And, it is not a coincidence that countries which are forerunners in flexicurity models have the highest rates of participation in lifelong learning and efficient and flexible education and training systems.

We need to motivate workers and employees to invest in upgrading skills and personal development of workers allowing them to better respond to competitiveness requirements and also to personal fulfilment. Governments should introduce financial and tax incentives to stimulate training opportunities.

Apart from that, a great deal of work remains to remove the obstacles that make the transitions from job to job difficult.

Skills are not easily comparable across borders and sectors and this hampers geographical and occupational mobility. A lack of validation of non-formal and informal learning has the same effect. We have a range of tools to help fix this problem.

- We are implementing a European Qualifications Framework, which will serve as a translation device for different qualifications.
- And we will soon come with a proposal to establish a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training much as we already have in place with the ECTS in higher education.

The Lifelong learning programme and the European Social Fund support the reforms of education and training systems and contribute to achieve our common goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, more than ever, cooperation and commitment of all the parties involved is of crucial importance. We can succeed only if we work together with a clear vision of our common goals. I wish you a successful and fruitful seminar.

Thank you.