

The challenge of enlargement

by Franz Fischler, Member of the European Commission

Enlargement of the European Union is clearly one of the biggest challenges in the coming years. For Europe, an enlarged Union has to be seen in the context of political and economic stability, peace and shared values. It is at one and the same time a historical imperative, a chance and a new responsibility, but not devoid of risks.

The need for stronger EU institutions

Enlargement negotiations have already started. It is evident that this widening process is going to affect profoundly the institutions, the policies and the identity of the EU. In my personal view, there can be no enlargement without considerable improvements in the EU decision-making process. When the number of members rises beyond 20, decisions by unanimous vote will become virtually impossible. However, despite the diversity of legal and economic systems the EU must ensure that the internal market can continue to work effectively. This is the task of the intergovernmental conference (IGC), which started in February to prepare the ground for stronger EU institutions. The Commission favours more substantive reform than the European Council in Tampere last autumn seemed prepared to discuss.

It cannot suffice to reach an agreement on the composition of the Commission, on the extension of qualified majority voting in the Council and on the weighting of Member States' votes. The Commission's report to the IGC has asked for more. In particular, it has suggested to split the Treaty into two parts: a fundamental part that can only be changed by unanimous vote, and the remainder, which could be amended by qualified majorities.

Enlargement and the forthcoming institutional reforms concern all citizens. Therefore, the path which the EU is following must be clear, transparent and understandable for everybody. Otherwise our project cannot succeed.

Beyond institutional change and communication, we have undertaken reform in a number of key policy areas in order to prepare and facilitate the process of enlargement for both the current EU members and the candidate countries. The agreement of Agenda 2000 last year prepares the agricultural sector, the Structural Funds and the financial perspective for enlargement within the next seven years.

Adapting our economy

The enlargement process reminds us of the EU's place in the world. Given current trends in globalisation it is clear that with or without enlargement our economy needs to adapt further. The special European Council which took place in Lisbon in March gave a clear signal as to which direction to take. With the support of the internal market, economic and monetary union and the launch of the euro, the EU has a favourable economic outlook. Growth for this year and the next is forecast at more than 3 %, inflation is at a historically low level and net job creation is expected to be above 1 % – that is 1.5 million new jobs per year.

To take advantage of this positive trend, the Commission has proposed to pursue economic reform. We have to prepare for the knowledge-based economy and strengthen the European social model by investing in people. The main objectives are sustained economic growth, full employment and social cohesion. Therefore the Commission is, for example, in favour of reinforcing the 'e-Europe' initiative in order to create an information society and of focusing on further developments of the internal market by 2004 by improving areas like public procurement, cross-border services, energy and civil aviation. To make our research and development capacity a key driver for the future, a genuine European research area should be created by 2002.

A successful intergovernmental conference, an internal reform of the European institutions and Europe-wide solutions regarding external policy, internal security and justice, as well as social and economic matters, are the best basis for widening the EU. Enlargement will not be easy, but with good preparation work and the Agenda 2000 reforms the process is, in my view, both manageable and positive.



DECISIONS

■ Towards a more competitive Europe ...

Sustainable economic growth, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion – these are the key goals of the strategy adopted by European Union (EU) Heads of State or Government, meeting as the European Council, in Lisbon on 24 March. The summit set specific deadlines for economic and social matters, which the EU and Member States will have to meet, in keeping with their respective powers. Action at the economic level will focus on four main areas, according to the European Council. They are: the information society, research, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the internal market.

The information society: The summit has asked the EU Council of Ministers and European Parliament to adopt, before the end of this year, all the legislation needed to ensure the smooth operation of electronic commerce. They should take similar action in the telecommunications field before the end of next year. Member States, for their part, must introduce greater competition this year in local access to telecom networks, in order to make it cheaper to use the Internet. They must also see to it that every school can access the Internet by the end of 2001 and that there is an adequate number of teachers by the end of 2002. In addition, Member States must ensure generalised electronic access to all the main basic public services by 2003.

Research: The European Council has provided for the creation of a European research area. The aim is to develop a method of assessing national policies by June 2000, and then to introduce a European innovation scoreboard by June 2001, on the lines of the single market scoreboard. The European Council also wants to ensure that a Community patent is available by the end of 2001. It must include a utility model, to ensure inexpensive patent protection for inventions at EU level. A very high-speed European network for electronic scientific communications is also provided for by the European Council by the end of 2001. Finally, the EU must take steps both to remove obstacles to the mobility of scientific workers and to retain them in Europe by 2002.

Small businesses: The EU Council and European Commission should, by June 2000, draw up a European charter for small companies and launch a benchmarking exercise on issues such as the length of time and costs involved in setting up a company in the various Member States. By the end of this year, the two EU institutions must review the financial instruments of the European Investment Bank and European Investment Fund in order to redirect funding towards support for business start-ups, high-tech firms, micro-enterprises and risk-capital initiatives.

Internal market: The European Council has asked the Commission, EU Council and Member States to set out two strategies for completing the single market. The first would aim at removing barriers to services, the second at simplifying the regulatory environment. The deadline for the first is the end of this year, for the second the end of 2001. As regards government procurement, the European Council is looking for two things: firstly, new rules, to come into force

by 2002, which make it easier for SMEs to take part in tenders, and, secondly, steps to ensure that government and Community procurement can take place online by 2003.

■ ... with greater job opportunities ...

Action on four fronts is provided for by the European Council as regards employment and social policy. They are: education, jobs, social protection and social inclusion.

Education: The European Council has called on other EU and national bodies to find, by the end of this year, ways of ensuring the best use of existing EU programmes (Socrates, Leonardo and Youth) and to remove the obstacles to teachers' mobility by 2002. Another goal is to halve by 2010 the number of 18–24-year-olds with only lower-secondary level education.

Jobs: Here the European Council has set two goals, to be reached by 2010. The first is to raise the employment rate from the current average of 61 to 70 %, while the second is to increase the number of women in employment from today's average of 51 % to more than 60 %. Member States should set national targets in keeping with their present situation.

The Lisbon Summit has asked for a study on the future evolution of social protection in general, and more particularly on the sustainability of pensions systems. A progress report should be ready by this December. The Commission has been asked to draft an initiative for cooperation between the Member States in promoting social inclusion. It is to be presented by this June.

■ ... and more coordination

The Lisbon Summit also decided to extend, to the EU's economic and social strategy as a whole, the methods already in use as regards its existing broad economic policy and employment guidelines. The aim is to set guidelines, combined with specific timetables, for achieving goals, which must then be translated into national and regional policies. In addition, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks must be set, as a way of comparing best practices in the different Member States and allowing periodic monitoring and peer review by governments. The European Council will hold a meeting every spring devoted to economic and social questions.

■ Updating the EU's customs code

The amendments to the European customs code, as adopted by the EU Council of Ministers on 16 March, provide for simpler and quicker customs procedures, on the one hand, and protection against fraud on the other. The text, now before the European Parliament, provides enhanced possibilities for the use of electronic customs declarations for both imports and exports. It also contains a precise definition of 'good faith' in the case of European importers who bring in goods duty-free, or at reduced rates of duty, under the EU's preferential systems. This both protects honest traders when incorrect certificates of origin have been

BACKGROUND

A competitive tool for the single market

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE FOR STANDARDISATION

Europe's internal market cannot function effectively as long as mutually incompatible national technical standards exist. However, the adoption and implementation of common standards allow companies to benefit from a Europe in which competition is greater but fairer. The main instrument of this standardisation is the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN), which deals with all areas of industry and services, with the exception of electrical engineering and telecommunications; responsibility for these two areas lies with the organisations Cenelec and ETSI respectively. For a number of products, ranging from unleaded petrol to lifts and ski goggles, the CEN has already achieved a considerable degree of technical harmonisation in Europe, but much remains to be done.

An organisation and a network

The CEN is a European organisation. It is also a network made up of national standardisation bodies, associated members representing the various interests at European level and a central secretariat based in Brussels.

The standardisation bodies of 19 countries are full members of the CEN: those of the 15 Member States of the European Union (EU), those of Iceland, Norway and Switzerland – members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) – and that of the Czech Republic, an EU applicant country. The standardisation bodies of 14 other countries are only affiliated to the CEN: 12 of these belong to applicant countries – Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey; the two others are from Albania and Croatia. Most of them are likely to join the organisation in the years to come.

The CEN also includes technical committees and working groups, which have the benefit of the experience of the bodies which created the CEN at the beginning of the 1960s, some of which have been involved in standardisation for almost a century.

The CEN has five associate members. Three of them represent economic sectors: ECCMF represents the chemical industry, Eucomed represents part of the medical equipment industry and FIEC represents part of the construction

industry. The other two associate members – ANEC and TUTB – represent consumers and trade unions respectively.

The central secretariat is responsible for coordinating and managing the organisation. The CEN is recognised and supported by the EU institutions, particularly the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as by EFTA.

Principles for effectiveness

The CEN is committed to uphold, in its work, principles which ensure that standardisation is representative, consistent and, of course, effective.

First, the committees which draw up the standards do so by consensus: they seek broad agreement among the participants, who represent all interest groups, but they do not necessarily seek unanimity. They work independently of any outside influence. Second, implementation of the standards is voluntary: generally, no one is compelled to use them, unless otherwise stipulated in a contract.

The standards themselves focus on the obligation to achieve a result. They also offer the choice of several solutions. They contain measurable criteria which make it easier to assess whether they are applied properly. Finally, they are adapted to the technology that is being developed. These standards do not aim for perfection but are state of the art, that is they can be met with a reasonable cost-benefit ratio without sacrificing safety; they are revised as technology progresses.

The CEN avoids duplication. It adopts as many ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) standards as possible. For the same reason, the national standardisation bodies and public authorities in the member countries refrain from developing national standards, and instead concentrate their efforts on working together. The organisation's member countries must incorporate European standards into their respective national systems and discard any national standards which are incompatible with them.

Finally, the CEN's work is done openly: draft standards are made available to the public.

Different types of standards

The CEN offers various types of solutions to promote technical harmonisation in Europe.

First, there are regular European standards, known as 'EN' ('European norm'). These have been the subject of a public inquiry, are very detailed, have been adopted by vote and must be transposed in this form in each country; they then have the status of a national standard, and conflicting national standards are withdrawn. The composition of unleaded petrol, and the designation of steel products and aeronautical components, for example, are subject to standards of this kind.

Voluntary standards drawn up in accordance with the 'new approach' relate to European Union directives which lay down only the fundamental requirements which the products and services in question must fulfil. Manufacturers who meet these standards may display the 'CE' – 'European Community' – mark on their products. This new approach, introduced by the EU's Council of Ministers, has been in existence for 15 years. It has allowed the adoption of standards in a number of areas, including lifts, toys, sunglasses, ski goggles, condoms and machine safety. European standards produced under this approach presume compliance with European law.

In order to assess the merit of future standards, one approach could be to introduce pre-standards for an experimental period, using the mark 'ENV'. If the result appears convincing, the CEN could convert them into regular standards.

It is important to note that European specifications are used to support the EU directives that regulate public contracts. There is, for example, a standard relating to the short-range communication link between vehicles and the beacons used for various traffic management systems, such as those for automatic toll-charge collection.

Ever-changing activities

Technology develops very rapidly, in particular in terms of the information society; consortia and business forums conclude agreements without consulting the standardisation authorities, which must take such action into account. For this reason the CEN created the CEN/ISSS (information society standardisation system). This system comprises several working groups which deal with subjects such as electronic commerce or online services. These groups' activities lead to European technical agreements (CWAs – 'CEN workshop agreements'), which accelerate the standardisation process. The first agreement of this kind was drawn up

within a year. The CWAs can subsequently be converted into traditional standards. This system could be extended to include sectors other than the information society.

Alongside standardisation proper, the CEN/ISSS is also involved in other work, such as the European campaign to increase awareness of electronic commerce: it provides information on the state of the art, the most successful standards and best practices. It prepares standardisation programmes for the European Commission relating to electronic signatures, consumers and people with disabilities.

The CEN will be heavily involved in many other areas in the coming months and years, for example in the trans-European transport and energy networks, which are under development and in need of standards. The same applies to the services sector in general, a major player in the creation of wealth and jobs in Europe; the CEN has already begun work on recruitment and relocation.

The management of EU environmental policies, which are constantly under development, calls for standards on testing, sampling and analysis. The introduction of environmental considerations in all of the Union's spheres of action affects standards in sectors of all types: of particular importance is that obstacles to the reuse or recycling of products must be avoided or removed.

The CEN anticipates having considerably more work to do: guidelines for individual protective equipment for workers are an example. Of course, it will have to draw up standards to supplement the European directives based on the new approach as soon as they are adopted. Finally, it must update existing European standards to reflect requirements.

Far beyond the confines of the EU

European standards are often used outside Europe. The CEN itself helps to promote them outside the EU by providing a technical cooperation unit offering technical assistance to applicant countries, the States of the former USSR and countries in the Mediterranean region. This assistance covers quality control, the transposal of 'new approach' European directives, the approximation of legislation, metrology, accreditation systems and conformity assessment systems.

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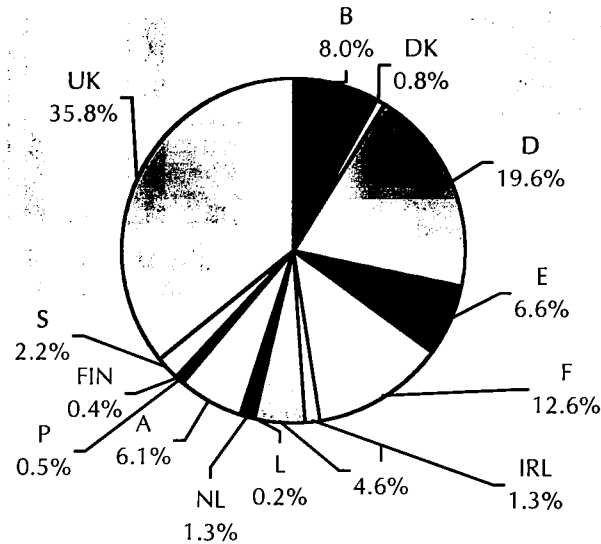
Selected education figures for the EU

Student mobility is still limited but, thanks to the extension of Erasmus, is increasing

Since its launch, over a decade ago, the number of students participating in Erasmus increased almost sevenfold by the 1998/99 academic year.

Outside the Erasmus programme, the UK is the most popular destination attracting over a third of all foreign higher education students studying abroad. Germany, France and Belgium follow as major attractions.

Incoming students, % of total EU, excluding Erasmus



Higher education students coming to study excluding Erasmus (1)

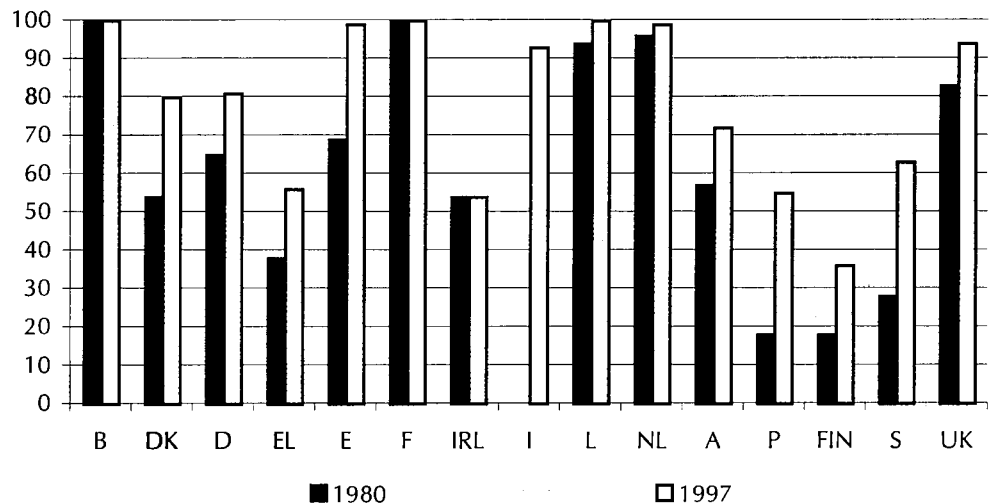
	B	DK	D	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1996/97	18 670	1 890	45 560	15 230	29 310	3 000	10 640	480	3 070	14 080	1 150	900	5 090	83 020

The participation rate in pre-primary education has on average increased over the two last decades.

On the basis of 1997 data, over 50% of four-year-olds start school in the EU as a whole.

Over 90% of four-year-olds go to school in Spain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK, while in Belgium, France and Italy participation in excess of 90% already applies to three-year-olds. The youngest to start school are the French at just two years of age.

Pre-primary participation at four years (%)



Pre-primary participation at four years (%)

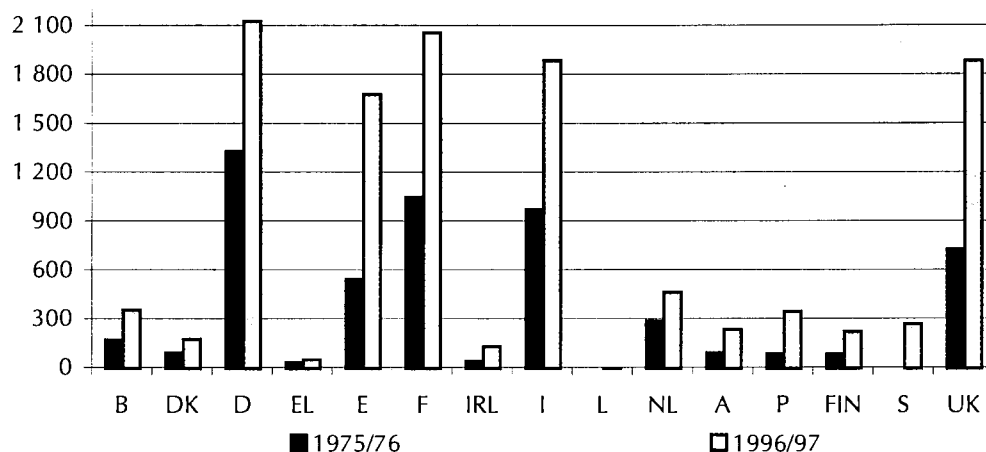
	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1980	100	54	65	38	69	100	54	:	94	96	57	18	18	28	83
1997	100	80	81	56	99	100	54	93	100	99	72	55	36	63	94

(1) Data for Greece were not available.

Over the last two decades, the number of higher education students has more than doubled

Looking back from 1996/97 figures, Portugal has shown the greatest relative growth with remarkable increases also observable in Greece, Spain and Ireland. In contrast, in Germany and the Netherlands, the growth has been small. In total, more than 12 million students are enrolled in higher education in the EU.

Higher education students 1975/76 and 1996/97 (1 000)



Higher education students 1975/76 and 1996/97

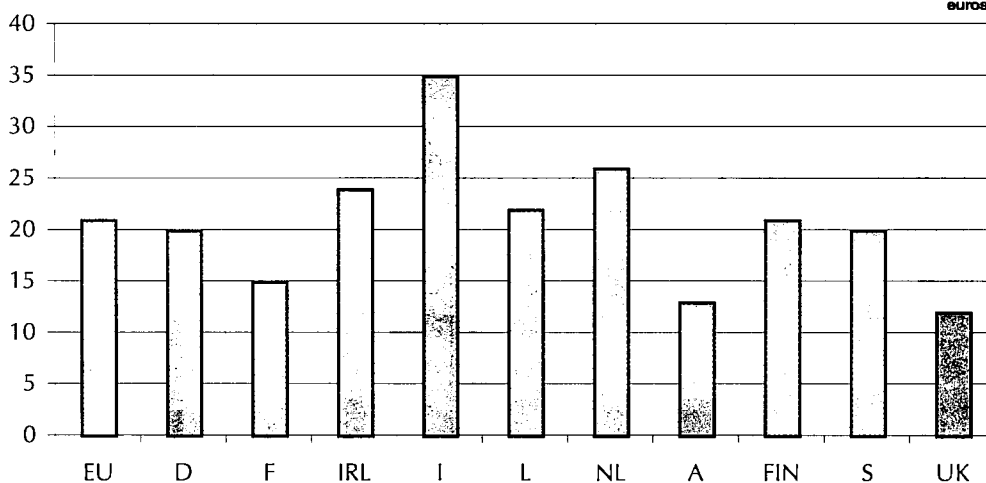


	EU	B	DK	D	EL	E	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	P	FIN	S	UK
1975/76	5 647	176	97	1 334	38	548	1 053	46	977	:	291	97	89	90	:	733
1996/97	12 266	361	180	2 132	56	1 684	2 063	135	1 893	2	469	241	351	226	275	1 891

According to 1996/97 figures, in most Member States for which data is available, one teacher in five in primary and secondary education is within ten years of retirement

The figures range from one in three in Italy to less than one in nine in Austria and the UK. Further, if one looks at the larger range of 40-plus, in Germany and Sweden some three in four teachers are over 40 and are thus relatively old.

Teachers within 10 years of retirement %^(*)



Teachers within 10 years of retirement age in primary and secondary education combined (1 000)



	EU	D	F	IRL	I	L	NL	A	FIN	S	UK
Teachers within 10 years of retirement	677.3	156.9	122.8	10.4	227.3	1.1	50.1	13.9	14.0	27.7	53.0
Total teachers	3 208.2	766.7	801.3	42.8	655.6	5.0	194.4	111.1	65.4	136.7	429.1

(*) Data were incomplete for B, DK, E, EL, and P; EU average only covers those countries for which data were available.

Source: Eurostat, Directorate-General for Education and Culture and Eurydice: Key data on education in Europe.

issued by third-country authorities and makes it possible to combat fraud. The revised code also makes more attractive the creation of a new type of free zone, on the one hand, and, on the other, inward processing – the manufacture for export of products using imported raw materials.

■ **Border-free self-employed persons**

Self-employed persons, who go to another EU Member State for less than a year in order to carry out some work, remain subject to the national health and pensions legislation of their country of origin. The E 101 certificate which they are given by the relevant authorities in their own country to prove their self-employed status must be more than enough, therefore, for the authorities of the host country. Consequently, the latter do not have the right in practice to require them to pay social security contributions under the scheme for employees. This follows from a ruling handed down by the European Court of Justice on 30 March, in a case involving the British opera singer, Barry Banks, several of his colleagues and a conductor, on the one hand, and the opera house in Brussels, the Théâtre royal de la monnaie (TRM), on the other. The former are settled in the United Kingdom, where they have the status of self-employed persons. They were engaged by the TRM for periods varying from a few weeks in some cases to some months in others. The opera house had deducted from their fees contributions to the Belgian social security system for employees, as provided for in their contracts. The musicians challenged the legitimacy of these deductions, and sought reimbursement through the Brussels labour court, which submitted the case to the European Court of Justice. Some of the musicians had submitted their E 101 certificate to the TRM at the time of their engagement, others only during the proceedings. The Court held that these documents had to be complied with by the Belgian authorities, regardless of when they were submitted.

■ **To be a market leader is not an abuse**

The recognition of a dominant market position in a European Commission decision authorising a takeover has no legal effect by itself, according to the European Court of First Instance, in a ruling handed down on 22 March, when it turned down the appeal lodged by two companies of the Coca-Cola group against the Commission's decision of 1997. At that time the Commission had authorised the American bottling company, Coca-Cola Enterprises Inc. (CCE), to take over the activities of the British company, Coca-Cola and Schweppes Beverages Ltd (CCSB). This takeover had been carried out under an agreement between The Coca-Cola Company (TCCC) and the UK company, Cadbury Schweppes plc. The text of the Commission's decision noted that CCSB had a dominant position in the British market for colas. TCCC and CCE felt that this observation could prove damaging to them, should their competitors invoke it in a national court. They therefore asked the European Court to annul the decision. The Court took the view that the observation in question had no binding legal effects. It added, however, that the charge of abuse of dominant market posi-

tion would lead to a fresh examination of the situation by the European Commission or a national court.

□ **IN BRIEF**

The European Commission approved on 21 March the **tables of equivalence** drawn up by Member States in the implementation of an EU directive on the **mutual recognition of drivers' licences issued before 1 July 1996**. Licences issued after that date are in line with a model harmonised at the European level.

Safety advisers for the transport of dangerous goods by road, rail or inland waterway will shortly have a more harmonised level of qualifications within the EU. As a result, they will find it easier to have their training certificates recognised in all the Member States. The directive adopted by the EU Council of Ministers on 28 March, following approval by the European Parliament, supplements the 1996 directive requiring undertakings whose activities include the transport or handling of dangerous goods to appoint safety advisers.

The European rules which limit **working time** and night work, and provide for a certain number of breaks, rest periods and paid holidays, are to be extended to junior doctors, sea-fishermen and those working on oil rigs. The European Parliament and EU Council reached agreement on 3 April on the terms of a directive which limits working time in these occupations, which have been excluded so far from EU regulation. The new text, which must be confirmed by both Parliament and Council, should be implemented within a period of three years at most. However, there is a five-year transitional period as regards the working week of junior doctors.

The European Commission announced on 27 March that it had decided on 9 March to withdraw the authorisations to market medicines containing at least one of **seven anorectic agents**: amfepramone, clobenzorex, fenproporex, mefenorex, norpseudoephedrine, phendimetrazine and phentermine. EU Member States must implement the decision within a maximum of 30 days of notification by the Commission. The latter has followed the opinion of the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products in the matter.

Strawberry jam can be described as '**entirely natural**' even though it contains traces of lead, cadmium and pesticides. A ruling to this effect was handed down by the European Court of Justice on 4 April, in a case involving the Austrian jam manufacturer, Darbo, and the German association against anticompetitive practices, which wanted the company to remove the reference to the term 'natural' from its label. Tests conducted in Germany had revealed the presence of harmful substances. The Court held that the term 'entirely natural' was compatible with the European directive on labelling, provided the levels were very low, given that garden fruit is inevitably exposed to pollution and pesticides.

The European Commission decided on 27 March to terminate the **two infringement proceedings against Portugal in the BSCH/Champalimaud case**. The Portuguese Government had tried to prevent, by means of a decree, the Spanish bank BSCH from acquiring a controlling interest in the Portuguese group Champalimaud, although the operation had been authorised by the Commission. The decree was contrary to internal market rules, and Lisbon decided finally to withdraw it, and not to oppose a revised version of the operation in question.

The ban on agreements between undertakings and abuse of dominant market position, provided for by the EC Treaty, applies to **associations of firms**, even when they are based on national legislation which the European Court of Justice has held to be contrary to the Treaty. This was the ruling handed down by the European Court of First Instance on 30 March, when it rejected the appeal lodged by the Italian national council of customs agents (CNSD) against a 1993 decision of the European Commission asking the CNSD to eliminate its anticompetitive tariffs. In 1998, the European Court of Justice had ruled that an Italian law which required the CNSD to adopt binding rates for the entire profession contravened European principles of free competition.

The EU Council formally adopted the **Youth action programme** on 10 April, following an agreement with the European Parliament. The programme covers exchanges of young people from European countries aged between 15 and 25, the European Voluntary Service, aimed at young people aged between 18 and 25, and innovative schemes for young people in the social field. The Youth action programme has a budget of EUR 520 million for the period 2000-06 (EUR 1 = GBP 0.60 or IEP 0.79).

The **selection rules for international tournaments** decreed by **sports federations** do not in themselves restrict the freedom to provide services guaranteed under EU rules. This was affirmed in a ruling handed down on 11 April by the European Court of Justice, which made it clear that the term 'amateur' as used by a sports federation in connection with its members did not mean that they were not in gainful employment. The dispute arose because the Belgian judoka, Christelle Deliège, had taken legal action against the Belgian and European judo federations, which she accused of having hindered her activities by not having selected her for certain international tournaments. According to the Court, it was up to a Belgian judge to decide whether Mrs Deliège's sporting activities amounted to the provision of services.

A regional law which provides for flexible quotas in order to **encourage the recruitment and promotion of women in the civil service**, even while ensuring that candidates are objectively assessed, does not contravene the 1976 European directive on equal treatment for men and women. This was the assessment of the European Court of Justice, made on 28 March, of the law adopted by the German *Land* of Hessen. The law had been challenged by 46 members of the Hessen regional parliament.

The European Commission adopted on 11 April the **regional aid map**, aimed at investments in large firms, submitted by **Spain** for the period 2000–06. The regions in question cover 79.2 % of the country's total population. The Commission had adopted a similar map for **Sweden** on 29 March. The regions covered, in the north of the country, will account for 15.9 % of the national population in the period from 2000 to 2006, as compared with 18.5 % in 1999.

INITIATIVES

● The European judicial area scoreboard

The European Commission's new scoreboard is designed to specify just which measures have still to be taken, and by whom, in order to construct a European area of liberty, security and justice. It will provide the EU with reference points over the next five years. The EU Council gave the scoreboard, a version of which is already in use in the single market, its political endorsement on 27 March. The scoreboard will be updated once every six months, with the change in the EU's rotating Presidency. It covers such topics as the right to asylum, immigration, the combat against racism and xenophobia, the fight against drugs, smuggling and money laundering, as well as crime prevention. The European Commission was asked to propose an EU scoreboard on justice and home affairs by the Tampere European Council last October.

○ IN BRIEF

The **charges for interconnections to fixed telecommunications networks**, which the European Commission recommended on 21 March for the current year, are some 8 % below those set for 1999. The Commission's recommendations are based on the best current practice

noted in the EU. They are drawn up in order to provide guidance to network operators and the national regulatory authorities. The interconnection charges represent one of the main items of expenditure for newly established companies.

In order to help EU Member States set up an **extrajudicial European network**, which would help resolve consumer disputes outside the courts, the European Commission proposed the necessary framework for it in a document published on 20 March. The network would include a single contact point or 'clearing house' in each EU country, which would keep consumers informed and help them to submit an appeal in the country in which the company with which they were in dispute was located. The network should be operational before autumn.

For the **settlement of electronic commerce disputes**, the European Commission proposed on 30 March the introduction of an online forum known as 'e-confidence'. It would make it possible to exchange both information and experiences, with a view to coordinating existing initiatives and to offer online buyers – firms and consumers – rapid, effective and low-cost methods of resolving their disputes without legal procedures. The Commission held a workshop on this theme at the end of March, with the participation of European, American and Canadian delegates. The EU is already co-financing the 'Web trader' system, aimed at increasing the reliability of Internet transactions between enterprises and consumers.

The **Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris stock exchanges** announced on 20 March that they were merging to form Euronext, which will have the second largest capitalisation in Europe after London, and should begin operations in September. Two days later the presidents of **eight European stock exchanges** – those of Frankfurt, London, Madrid, Milan and Zurich, plus the three already mentioned – reached agreement on the drafting by November of common standards for accessing each other's markets.

Greece lifted on 26 March **identity checks at airports** on EU citizens going to another member of the Schengen group – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. This measure completes the implementation of Greece's entry into the Schengen area, which was created in order to speed up the elimination of border checks within the EU.

SEEN FROM ABROAD

► Information for the east

The 10 countries of central and eastern Europe that are negotiating to join the EU met in Sofia on 8 and 9 April to formulate jointly an information policy on EU membership aimed at their own people and the 15-nation EU. The conference brought together the ministers in charge of relations with the EU, experts and journalists. Enlargement will ensure the present Member States peace as well as additional growth and jobs, according to the Polish Foreign Minister, Bronislaw Geremek. The 10 countries in question are Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

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