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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Professional services in the green transition

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2025/765)

Rapporteur: **Violeta JELIĆ**

Co-rapporteur: **Gaetano STELLA**

Advisor	Vladimíra DRBALOVÁ (to the Group I rapporteur) Alessio D'AMATO (to the Group III co-rapporteur)
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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC welcomes the European Commission's commitment communicated in the new 2024-2029 political guidelines to creating a plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, based on a new 'Clean Industrial Deal' and a well-functioning EU single market, which are vital for a smooth green and digital transition.

1.2. The EESC recognises the fundamental role that professional services play in the green transition, which is implicit in the 'Clean Industrial Deal' and is a potential source of both opportunities and challenges, in particular in terms of skill needs.

1.3. The EESC calls on the EU institutions to create measures for businesses to adapt to the changes brought by a process as complex as the green transition, in order to keep businesses in Europe and to face challenging sustainability objectives within the EU. Special attention should be given to family businesses and to micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and to achieving competitiveness objectives.

1.4. The EESC is concerned that the greening process may stall due to labour and skill shortages, skill mismatches, and increasing regulatory, administrative and cost burdens, as well as new challenges brought on by rapid changes in supply chains.

1.5. The new vision for the Union of Skills needs to be implemented. Consistent reforms need to be carried out in education systems to adapt curricula to changes in the world of work, to support all relevant educational programmes (including STEM), to implement a new strategy for vocational education and training (VET), and to support teachers and improve coordination at EU level.

1.6. The EU institutions and the Member States should recognise the essential role that the professional services – whether regulated or unregulated – play in Europe's ambitious return to prosperity. This return, however, must be in line with environmental and sustainability objectives and support the evolution of skills in a synergic way with economic sectors, explicitly accounting for the evolving structures of value chains.

1.7. The EESC also recognises the need to encourage educational initiatives at both EU and Member State levels. This could involve specific financial incentives for VET courses aimed at greening professional services. It could also involve establishing EU-level academic courses to bring in new professionals or train existing professionals in sustainability objectives, and to promote both adaptation to and improvements in existing skills and jobs (upskilling and reskilling programmes). These initiatives could also create new skills for the green and digital transitions.

1.8. The EESC suggests targeting policies to support professional service networking in order to improve the operating scale of the related activities, properly accounting for each Member States' specific characteristics.

1.9. The skill gap could be closed by following the above suggestions and training skilled professionals within Europe, or by attracting professionals from outside the EU through policies and initiatives (e.g. the 'Talent Pool' initiative, which could help attract professionals from third countries and at the same time broaden the market for EU professionals).

1.10. The EESC emphasises the important role that social partners, professional service organisations and other relevant civil society organisations play in successful and just green transition processes.

1.11. The EESC also highlights other challenges in the broad context of professional service provision, including barriers to qualification recognition, which will need to be lifted to help leverage professional mobility and address skill gaps. The EESC recommends continuous efforts in this field, also through follow-up opinions on these issues.

2. **Political context**

2.1. During a special meeting of the EU Council on 17-18 April 2024, EU leaders committed to a new European competitiveness deal anchored in a fully integrated single market. This must be targeted towards enhancing Europe's economic, manufacturing, industrial and technological base, thereby securing the Union's economic resilience and industrial renewal, global competitiveness, technological leadership and attractiveness as a business location. Specific measures are now part of the European Commission President's new 2024-2029 political guidelines, with the EU's long-term objectives clearly highlighted in the recent Draghi report ([1]).

2.2. **The green transition is ongoing; however, crucial steps still need to be undertaken in several sectors**. Evidence indeed suggests that some of the environmental impacts of European activities have been decreasing over time, as shown by CO_2 emissions and material efficiency statistics; however, a stable transition needs additional steps ([2]).

2.3. The main focus should be on implementing the existing legal framework for 2030 in the simplest, fairest and most cost-efficient way. However, the announced **Clean Industrial Deal** –backed by the **Decarbonisation Accelerator Act** to support industries and companies during the transition period – also brings with it several challenges and opportunities.

2.4. **Industry needs to be kept in Europe** ([3]) **because industry will deliver the climate solutions Europe needs**. EU leaders are committed to working with stakeholders in developing and implementing an effective industrial policy ([4]) that decarbonises our industry in a competitive manner (reducing administrative and regulatory burdens), develops the Union's competitive edge in digital and clean technologies, diversifies and secures strategic supply chains, repositions value chains and strengthens Europe's technological and industrial base.

([1]) Draghi, M., 2024, *The future of European competitiveness*.
([2]) See data available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/sdi.
([3]) Antwerp Declaration signatories. Will you join us?
([4]) EUCO conclusions, 18.4.2024: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/m5jlwe0p/euco-conclusions-20240417-18-en.pdf.

2.5. **The green transition also implies sectoral changes and a growing relevance of environmental goods and services sectors (EGSS)**. Evidence suggests that employment and value added in the EGSS are growing faster than the overall EU economy ([5]), paving the way to new professional services (e.g. green audits).

2.6. Above all, the European Green Deal must be just and must take into account the possible risks and costs of the climate and energy transitions. Only with a strong industrial fabric and a strengthened and well-structured continuous social dialogue between social partners (employers and workers) at all levels can we ensure a just green transition. The transition process must include organisations and associations representing professions that are crucial for reaching the targets of the green and digital transitions.

3. Scant progress in structural reforms in the service sector

3.1. The unprecedented shock to the EU economy caused by the COVID-19 pandemic requires a response on all fronts in order to achieve a successful economic rebound. Along with other measures, **effective and impactful structural reforms in the service sector could boost economic recovery and help make it sustainable**. Services play a major part in the EU economy, not only in terms of their direct contribution to value added and employment, but also in terms of their role as links throughout the value chains and their vital role in industrial ecosystems ([6]) and in developing innovative green solutions.

3.2. **The Antwerp Declaration** ([7]) **for a European Industrial Deal is a new impetus for the professional services**. There is an urgent need for clarity, predictability and confidence in Europe and its industrial policy. The signatories call for **a comprehensive action plan to elevate competitiveness as a strategic priority and to create conditions for a stronger business case in Europe**.

3.3. **Professional services play a crucial role in the energy and green transitions**, as they ensure specialised skills and high standards of safety and quality in the development and implementation of sustainable technologies. Their ethical values, expertise and commitment to continuous training are fundamental in designing and constructing efficient, low-impact infrastructures, thereby promoting innovation and integrity in production processes, helping businesses (especially MSMEs) with the regulatory and administrative challenges brought by the new definitions of sustainable economic activities, and to identify available financing options for those activities.

4. The key role of the service sector in achieving green supply chains and repositioning value chains

4.1. In the current European economic landscape we can see significant changes in the dynamics of manufacturing supply chains. These changes are expected to help reposition value chains and to encourage reshoring, with many companies considering bringing back production and services previously offshored to non-EU countries. Professional services ([8]) provide businesses with the necessary support to address these challenges.

4.2. **Moreover, the ongoing transformation can be particularly relevant for MSMEs**, where the challenges of the green transition, including adhering to obligations conceived with larger firms in mind, require them to build capacity to address green and sustainability issues. This interaction between SMEs and professionals can enable businesses to become more competitive, innovative, and resilient. The availability of funding sources, financial incentives/grants, assistance identifying potential markets, and support in developing new products, services or processes and for marketing or distribution are crucial for the transition towards a resource-efficient future ([9]). These green consultancy services are based on professional expertise and provide SMEs with an important market for new professional services, and need to be developed and encouraged.

([5]) 2000-2021 Eurostat data: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Environmental_economy_%E2%80%93_statistics_on_employment_and_growth.
([6]) COM(2021) 385 final on taking stock and updating the reform recommendations for regulation in professional services.
([7]) EU industrial summit, 20.2.2024: https://antwerp-declaration.eu/pdf/declaration.pdf.
([8]) These include social-health, technical and economic-legal, as well as cross-cutting professions.
([9]) Flash Eurobarometer 498, March 2022, available at: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2287.

4.3. Achieving progress in services thus also offers significant positive spill-over effects for EU industry ([10]). Around 38 % of the overall value added embedded in the demand of manufacturing industries in the EU is generated by services ([11]). These services are also traded within and outside the EU ([12]), resulting in potential impacts on employment and in job losses. The specificities of each Member State also need to be considered, as for small and micro firms the proximity of professional services providers is a crucial factor in determining demand. This makes the need for an up- and re-skilling also targeted on smaller professional services providers even more urgent.

4.4. The reported evidence seems to suggest that **significant opportunities exist for professionals in the technical and legal-economic fields to improve growth and competitiveness for sustainable supply chains**. This is part of the potential (intangible) value added of professions for the green transition. The sector of professional services itself can also directly contribute to emission reductions. Emissions can be reduced by around 10 % by reducing business travel; by 30-40 % by using renewable power and heat in offices; and by a further 15 % by opting for greener modes of transport (renewable fuels, EVs, etc.) ([13]).

5. **Building skills for the green and digital transitions**

5.1. The employment and skills dimensions of greening the economy are common to all profound transformations. These transitions create the need to observe, anticipate, raise awareness, adapt the training offer, facilitate transitions and act locally.

5.2. The ambitious European environmental and sustainability objectives will create new occupations and change existing ones. **This process will certainly affect conditions for further developing professional services**. Upskilling and reskilling, lifelong learning and soft and multidisciplinary skills are key for ensuring that companies have a sufficiently skilled workforce to respond to their evolving needs. The roles of existing professionals and the evolution of required skills must be addressed. The revision of the European classification of occupations, skills and competences (ESCO) includes 571 green skills, transversal skills and knowledge concepts, which are in line with the definition of green skills provided by the Cedefop ([14]). Targeted efforts towards establishing a 'correspondence' between existing sustainability requirements and professional skills and jobs are needed, and it won't be easy.

5.3. Digitalisation can broaden existing professional profiles, strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration with other professions and, if the criteria set out in the Rome Manifesto ([15]) are followed, favour the emergence of new professions in the spirit of an evolving system. In addition, digitalisation will increase the continuing commercialisation of professional services and transform traditional professional profiles. Most importantly, **the digital and green transitions can be considered 'twin transitions'**, in that they go hand-in-hand and can reinforce each other.

5.4. **Using EU funds more effectively, in a coordinated manner, and to invest in education and skills** at national level ([16]) (for instance to support actions under the **Pact for Skills, net-zero skills academies and large-scale skills partnerships**) can help to align education and training with skills demand. It is important to continue to strengthen the role and profile of VET to train people in basic, managerial, cross-cutting and STEM skills from an early stage. VET also needs to be better positioned and recognised as a driver of productivity and innovation.

([10]) COM(2021) 385 final on taking stock of and updating the reform recommendations for regulation in professional services of 2017.

([11]) COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT 2023 Annual Single Market Report: Single Market at 30.

([12]) Source for extra-EU trade: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_international_trade_in_other_business_services. Source of data for considerations on intra-EU trade: based on Eurostat database on international trade in goods. Categories considered are: 'Services: Financial services'; 'Services: Professional and management consulting services'; 'Services: Technical, trade-related, and other business services', available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/international-trade-in-goods/database.

([13]) World Economic Forum, *Net-Zero Challenge: The Supply Chain Opportunity*, January 2021, p. 39, available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/net-zero-challenge-the-supply-chain-opportunity/.

([14]) Cedefop (2012), *Green skills and environmental awareness in vocational education and training*, Publications Office, Luxembourg: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5524_en.pdf. Green skills can be defined as 'the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a society which reduces the impact of human activity on the environment'. Green skills include energy audit skills (in the context of information skills) and skills related to training staff on recycling programmes or on hazardous waste (in the context of communication, collaboration and creativity). Green knowledge includes sustainable installation materials and emissions standards (in the context of engineering, manufacturing and construction). See (also for the classification methodology): https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/about-esco/publications/publication/green-skills-and-knowledge-concepts-labelling-esco.

([15]) A new vision for Europe: https://www.romemanifesto.eu/.

([16]) *Annual Single Market and Competitiveness Report 2024*.

5.5. **Encouraging partnerships may lead to economies of scale that would enhance the competitiveness of professional service providers**. This is expected to be particularly relevant in contexts where SMEs, family businesses and micro-enterprises operate, and where the automisation of certain jobs may hinder the development of specific skills. Social partners and professional organisations (particularly employers) are essential in designing and delivering VET. STEM and entrepreneurial careers and disciplines should also be promoted among young people, in particular among women and girls. In general, national policymakers at all levels should give importance to investments in effective career guidance. EU-level tools, such as common training frameworks, could also be very useful for certain professions and fields, such as engineering.

5.6. **It is essential to redefine university training courses aimed at achieving professional qualifications**, in order to enhance the integration between professional skills and teaching programmes. Involving professionals in defining the content of training courses would make the courses more interdisciplinary and more open to social and market dynamics. Moreover, it is essential to promote applied research, for example through industrial doctorates, to create highly specialised job profiles. Aligning university educational programmes across the Member States and coordinating them at European level could contribute to improving the knowledge, education and qualifications of young professionals, much in the same way as the European Commission initiatives that were presented in March 2024 ([17]). Developing a European University Network could also contribute in this regard. Special attention – with a specific focus on equal opportunities – should also be given to people with disabilities and special needs so that no one is left behind.

6. **Facing skill gaps**

6.1. Reshaping skills for the green transition is a systemic challenge. Evidence ([18]) suggests that the green transition is expected to involve substantial reskilling, regardless of the technological features of the sectors involved. Overall, this links with the need to clearly identify 'green' professions and to provide education at different levels (e.g. academic, on-the-job, lifelong learning) in order to fill skill gaps and to facilitate efforts to scale up, both on the supply side (EU level or local professional partnerships) and on the demand side (e.g. small business, network or regional partnerships). In some kinds of professions, including STEM professions, the gender equality dimension is expected to be particularly relevant in policy design. The green transition also involves the creation of new occupations (carbon accountants, CCUS specialists, climate lawyers, ESG certification and auditing professionals, etc.). The education sector must reflect the demand for these new professions and should be encouraged to create new or innovate existing curricula to meet this demand. **Overall, skill shortages should be addressed through specifically designed policies rather than broad 'one-size-fits-all' solutions**.

6.2. Europe needs to be attractive and open to talent and professional service providers, both from within its borders and from non-EU countries. The Commission's proposal for a Talent Pool Regulation ([19]) (to create the first joint IT platform for employers and job seekers from third countries) can also be a good tool for attracting professional service providers from non-EU countries. However, in meeting increasing demands for reskilled workers and for 'new' skills, consideration must be given to the quality of training and education, and to repositioning strategic value chains, in line with the green transition.

6.3. The ongoing transition brings with it other challenges, which may also involve existing issues in the context of professional service provision. This includes barriers to qualification recognition, which need to be lifted in order to help leverage professional mobility and curb skill shortages ([20]). This is addressed in the 2013 revision of the Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications ([21]), and in a European Court of Auditors special report on the recognition of professional qualifications (2024) ([22]). **This highlights new issues that need to be further dealt with in the context of the green transition**.

([17]) Universities package: https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-a-blueprint-for-a-european-degree.
([18]) https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2f2543c2-c4b5-11ee-95d9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-304842685.
([19]) Proposal for Regulation establishing an EU Talent Pool: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/regulation-establishing-eu-talent-pool_en.
([20]) Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's 2022 State of the Union address.
([21]) OJ L 354, 28.12.2013, p. 132, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L:2013:354:TOC Directive 2013/55/EU.
([22]) https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2024-10/SR-2024-10_EN.pdf.

7. **Links with other ongoing opinions**

This opinion was developed in close coordination with opinion TEN/836 on *Labour and skills shortages in transport, energy, infrastructure and the digital sector*. The two opinions complement each other, especially in their shared aims to support and contribute to the implementation of the action plan on labour market shortages ([23]), and to address the skill mismatches in twin transition processes.

Brussels, 4 December 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([23]) Commission sets out actions to tackle labour and skills shortages - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission.