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Key lessons for supporting youth in their steps to work

Discussion paper for the Interreg North-West Europe project “Empowering Youth through Entrepreneurial Skills (EYES)” - June 2020

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Introduction

The current labour market crisis shows the continued relevance to study youth unemployment. The corona crisis started as a health crisis, but is rapidly turning into an economic and social crisis. Young people as well as the low skilled will be among the first groups struggling with job loss and unemployment (Eurofound 2020a; Bekker 2020; Wilthagen 2020). The past financial crisis of around 2008-2014 has shown that growing youth unemployment coincides with a drop in demand for labour, and declining chances to get an internship (Chung et al., 2012; O'Reilly et al. 2018). Moreover, youth unemployment can be quite an enduring problem with severe personal, social and economic consequences.¹ Therefore, lessons from the past crisis can be of great value when developing labour market policies to support youth in their steps towards work.

How to help young people attempting to enter the labour market? There is surprisingly little research that determines exactly what interventions or support systems work best (Mawn et al 2017; Kluve et al 2017).² Nevertheless, this report brings together key lessons from a range of studies. To this end, the report goes beyond studying single interventions. It also includes international comparative studies to labour market policies for youth. Moreover, the report sketches the wider relevance for societies to

1 The group of young people (age 18-24) neither in education, nor in employment (NEETs) is 13.7% in the EU28 in 2018 (edat_ifse_20). High NEET levels may be reported in Italy (24.9%) and Greece (20%). In the countries belonging to the Interreg regions of the EYES projects NEET rates range from France (15.2%), UK (13.4%), Belgium (11.5%), Germany (8.1%) and the Netherlands (5.4%). Moreover, low skilled youngsters and women tend to have higher NEET rates.

2 Mawn et al. (2017: 2) attribute the scarce evidence to a lack of rigorous trial designs in evaluations of potentially effective interventions, fluctuations in political and economic climates, and diverse research bases.

invest in programmes that support youth. A poor start on the labour market has a long-term effect on income, debt, housing, home ownership, and the formation of relationships and families. Well-being is also at stake. This should encourage policy-makers to timely and even structurally invest in programmes for youth, building on social as well as economic arguments.

Labour market policies for youth: key lessons from EU countries

There are wide differences between the labour markets of Member States. Some have high unemployment rates and low labour demand, whereas others have more jobs available to the unemployed. On the one hand, this means that there is also a variety of ways in which countries deal with youth unemployment. Some countries focus more on skills mismatches while others prioritise the distribution of jobs (Eichhorst et al. 2015). On the other hand, youth policies focus often on the supply side of labour, for instance increasing human capital (Eichhorst et al. 2015). Countries thus tend to increase the competencies of youth rather than focusing on increasing the number of jobs (Chung et al., 2012). Still, stimulating employers to offer more jobs to youth, including youth who are distanced from the labour market, could be of added value (e.g. Beck 2015). Such observations point at the need of making a good mix of policies that focus on various causes and consequences of youth unemployment.

Make a smart mix of national and local policies

Regarding young persons neither in employment nor in education (NEETs), Maguire (2013) suggests to create a mix of preventative strategies, strategic level responses and re-integration strategies. All three are important to reduce the percentage of youngsters with a NEET status (See also Bekker and Klosse 2016; Bacher, Koblbauer, Leitgob, and Tamesberger 2017).

Firstly, preventative strategies are early interventions, preventing a young person from becoming a NEET later on in life (Maguire, 2013). Secondly, strategic level responses are early responses via labour market policies, including active labour market policies, job creation schemes or labour demand stimulating policies (Maguire 2013). This requires a broad view on the labour market and its relation with the social security system, encompassing transitions from school-to-work, transitions between temporary jobs and between inactivity and work. The recent labour market impact of corona crisis demonstrates this need for systemic views: many workers with temporary employment contracts and solo self-employed have lost their jobs, and are in dire need of income support or support in finding new employment (Eurofound 2020b). Such encompassing and immediate support is often unavailable. Thirdly, reintegration strategies aim at bringing NEETs back to work or education (Maguire 2013).

Following from above, success factors for youth policies do not solely focus on the period in which youngsters have become NEET. They also covers the period in which they are still in school as well as the period in which they move into their first (temporary) job. Thus, both preventive action and helping youth to remain employed are necessary (cf Bekker and van Deurzen 2020; Hartlapp and Schmidt 2008). Such efforts take more than just the contributions of local actors to support youth in finding employment. It also means having overarching policies by national governments to improve the condition of the overall labour market, as well as the support of schools to keep young people engaged.

The EU policy context of the youth guarantee, to which all national governments within the EU committed themselves, includes such ingredients. This youth guarantee urges to:

ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

This means **fast** intervention by giving a **high quality** offer, in which education matters but a job or an internship matters as well.

The ideas of this youth guarantee are more or less in line with the main findings from analyses of policies in a range of countries (i.e. two large EU comparative researches on national institutional arrangements: EXCEPT³ - *Cumulative Disadvantage, Coping Strategies, Effective Policies and Transfer* and STYLE⁴ - *Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe*). Table 1 gives the key ingredients for lowering youth unemployment.

Table 1: key lessons and ingredients for preventing and decreasing youth unemployment

LESSON	INGREDIENTS
1. Prevention -early intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep youth in school/work • Work experience in education • Mind transitions (end school/contract)
2. Individualized, tailored support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to cater for different needs (sub)groups
3. Integrated approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive (e-)outreach • Involve all relevant stakeholders • Partnership & co-ordination, especially at local level
4. Create better opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good offer • Human capital development • Effective case management
5. Create secure labour markets and income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial support as safety net • Flexible work as stepping stone o better jobs • Carrot works better than stick

3 27 EU countries plus Ukraine

4 Especially the comparative study of Eichhorst et al. (2016) based on the EU 27 plus Turkey, including eight in-depth country studies: Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK

Key lessons explained

➔ 1. *Prevention – early intervention*

Success factors of youth employment interventions include preventing that young people drop out of school and preventing them of becoming a NEET (Kelly and McGuinness 2015; Gutierrez-Garcia et al., 2017; Noh and Lee 2017; Saczynska-Sokol 2018).

A supportive factor to make a good transition from school to work, is vocational education and training (VET) with apprenticeships, or any other initiative that strengthens the link between education, training and work (Eichhorst et al. 2016; Gonzales Carreras et al. 2015; Tamesberger et al. 2014; Alfieri, Sironi, Marta, Rosina, and Marzana 2015). Via VET and apprenticeships, pupils gain experience in ‘real’ jobs and with ‘real’ employers, while being in school. This provides them with important skills, such as proper perceptions, attitudes and behaviour regarding work (e.g. Chen 2011). Moreover, it gives youth access to a small but nevertheless very important professional network, even before graduation, for instance through career mentors who can serve as role models (Chen 2011). Additionally, Hadjivassiliou (2017) finds that early vocational guidance in combination with job search assistance often improves the transition from school to work, especially for more disadvantaged youth (Eichhorst et al. 2015).

➔ 2. *Individualized, tailored support*

The group of young NEETs is quite heterogeneous, with differences in educational attainment, being (long-term) unemployed, family background, ethnicity, nationality, sex, or health (Eichhorst et al. 2015; Furlong 2006; Yates and Payne 2006). It is therefore relevant to take the social context of youth into account when trying to understand their (failed) transition from school to work (Bynner and Parsons 2002).

For instance, young people with mental health and behavioural problems have higher difficulties with making the step from school to work (Rodwell et al., 2018). However, understanding the individual also helps, for instance to understand the reason for the scarce involvement of NEETs in sports or voluntary work, which could be due to a lack of encouragement and incentives (Nardi et al. 2015). Austrian research shows that early school-leaving, health-related impairments, and experiences with unemployment, increase the chance of becoming a NEET. Having children under the age of three, increases the likeliness of young women to become a NEET (Tamesberger et al. 2014). If it is known which groups have the highest risks of becoming NEET, or face the largest difficulties when returning to school or work, one can improve policies by targeting these to specific groups (Eichhorst et al. 2016).

However, Yates and Payne (2006) argue that being in a NEET status for a while is not always a negative status, but it could be a voluntary choice (see also Simmons and Thompson (2011). Sometimes young people are between types of education or want to focus on care responsibilities until their children are older. This might not be problematic per se. Moreover, NEETs may be as motivated as their peers, but many face long-standing psychological challenges, which gives them disadvantages when seeking employment. In an economic context with structural barriers to all job seekers, NEET youths’ psychological vulnerabilities place them at even greater risk (Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016). This refers back to the relevance of sound strategic level responses (see also key lesson number 5 on creating secure labour markets and income).

Thus, the high diversity within the NEET population requires targeted policy interventions, tailored to their specific needs (Hadjivassiliou, 2017). Puerto (2007) supports this by stating that not the type of intervention determines the programme's success, but the programme's targeting strategies toward disadvantaged youth (among other factors). This also means having diagnostic systems that uncover specific needs and circumstances of vulnerable young people. This might require a comprehensive range of person-centred services and interventions in order to effectively address their complex and multiple needs (Hadjivassiliou 2017).

It also requires a degree of flexibility to cater for different pathways towards a transition to work or school, including providing and acknowledging small steps taken towards a job or education. For the hardest to reach youth, a first step towards their active engagement could be paying attention to build motivation and develop self-confidence and self-esteem (Hadjivassiliou, 2017). Other successful ingredients for vulnerable youth include personalised counselling, mentoring and on-going support (Hadjivassiliou 2017). A mentor helps young people to navigate the various (and often complex) administrative systems. A mentor also offers support throughout the intervention. Moreover, intensive interventions (e.g. 884 hours, 6 months, or an 8-month residential programme) with multiple components decrease unemployment amongst NEETs (Mawn et al 2017).

Viewing the list above, investing in youth means giving the challenge of unemployment enough time, human effort and money in order to be successful, especially for youth who needs to take many small steps before finding a job. Such intensive efforts is also required for the cooperation between stakeholders at the local level, as the next key lesson shows.

➔ 3. Integrated approach: partnerships at the local level

Stakeholders should cooperate in order to have effective help and programmes for youth. Cooperation prevents that young people get lost between different policy domains and it avoids service fragmentation (Hadjivassiliou 2017). Stakeholders include Public Employment Services (PES), municipalities, schools, social services, health services, employers, trade unions, NGOs and youth organisations. Especially at the local level, partnership is relevant, offering integrated service to youth at risk (Hadjivassiliou 2017). This requires that organizations take time to get to know each other, and are able to keep in close contact with each other, informing on policies, cases and needs. At times, it helps to be able to share information about some young persons, for instance if they need further help and support (Wilthagen 2019). However, data sharing is not always facilitated and may meet constraints concerning privacy (Smulders 2019).

Additionally, it is important to actively reach out to youth. Large groups of youth at risk are not registered (e.g. with PES), and are therefore not to-be-found in any government data base. Proper outreach is in this case of eminent importance in order to identify young people in need of help and to include them in appropriate programmes (Saczynska-Sokol 2018; Hadjivassiliou 2017). Especially the involvement of experts with specialist knowledge and skills in how to engage with hard-to-reach young people is critical (Hadjivassiliou 2017). Such outreach activities or workshops could, for some groups, include managing substance use, emotion regulation and life plans (Gutierrez-Garcia et al., 2017). The involvement of multiple stakeholders matches the diversity within the group of youth at risk and their multiple and varied needs, as these stakeholders can contribute to designing and delivering programmes that can accommodate this variety (Hadjivassiliou, 2017).

➔ 4. Create better opportunities

Of key relevance is to make a decent offer to youth: a **quality** offer on a job, internship or education, which creates further opportunities for them. For instance, if an internship is offered, this needs to be a genuine internship with proper guidance and a decent level of remuneration. Countries may also implement measures that stimulate employers to employ young people (Eichhorst et al. 2016). Such jobs should be decent jobs with an opportunity to make subsequent steps towards new and better jobs. At present, the move from one fixed-term job to another is a 'risky' affair which could lead to (temporary) unemployment. After-care schemes could support youngsters after graduation, for instance the school giving a helping hand to recent graduates. Such support could remain available during the early stages of young people's working lives (Hadjivassiliou, 2017).

In terms of education, a good offer means an offer that allows youth to develop their 'human capital'. This could also mean investing in quite basic and soft skills, that only entail making small steps towards the labour market or education. In addition, the development of confidence and self-esteem, may be of key relevance for some groups of youth. Projects should be designed to motivate youth, for instance by focusing on practical, vocational or work-related provision (Hadjivassiliou, 2017; see also next section). Such programmes, offering the development of basic and soft skills, as well as the development of confidence and self-esteem, should be an integral part of youth interventions (Hadjivassiliou, 2017). Kluve et al (2017) sees positive effects for building entrepreneurship and skills training. Additionally, second-chance education and/or 'bridging' programmes have proved to be effective in preparing vulnerable young people for entry to mainstream education (Hadjivassiliou, 2017).

Linked to this is the need for effective case management or counselling, which is also a key ingredient in successful youth programmes (cf Bynner and Parsons 2002). This means tailored support, individual action plans combined with personalised help and support throughout the entire process of re-integration, including a follow-up well after the end of the intervention (Hadjivassiliou, 2017). Taking such approaches increases the sustainability outcomes. This also means that the key stakeholders in this process should have sufficient means (money and personnel) to play such an active and long-lasting role (see also Vancea and Utzet 2018). Especially giving proper support to youth at risk requires much more intensive and personalised attention (Hadjivassiliou, 2017).

Box 1 gives an example of the Work Experience Grant in the Netherlands. This scheme was successful in getting young people into high quality internships. The scheme is now being converted into a Work Experience Grant 2.0 to facilitate youth, school-leavers in particular, that try to enter the labour market during the corona crisis.

Box 1 Intervention example: Work Experience Grant

The NEET population is very diverse; it covers those who are temporarily in-between jobs, as well as those with a complex situation, such as addiction and criminal behavior. This diversity is also reflected in the range of available policies to prevent and combat NEET status, as a one-size fits all approach does not exist. A programme that is widely available in the Netherlands and that over 4,000 young adults (aged 18-27) participated in, is the Work Experience Grant (Dutch: Startersbeurs; www.startersbeurs.nu).

The WEG is a voluntary program that aims to improve the job prospects of young adults by providing wage subsidy to boost the number of paid traineeships. Youth are stimulated and facilitated to find a traineeship of their own choosing. The traineeship is formalized in a contract based on a minimum of 32 hours per week for a maximum period of 6 months.

From June 2014 until May 2017, 2,839 young adults participated in a longitudinal study concerning the effects of the WEG. One year after completion of their traineeships, 81.9% were employed. Of those employed, 74.3% trainees had a job that matched their educational level; 61.6% trainees had a job that (very) well matched their skills, 58.9% trainees had a job that offered (very) well career prospects, and 75.5% trainees were (very) satisfied with their job.

Factors that predicted positive employment outcomes were perceived usefulness, active job search behaviour, supervisor support, social capital, and adaptability. Especially the robust effect of perceived usefulness of the programme on employment, implies that reintegration programmes might increase their effectiveness by making their theory of change more explicit. If trainees know why they do a task and how it relates to the programme's goal (i.e. gaining employment), perceived usefulness and consequently employment quality increases. Furthermore, the positive effect of supervisor support and social capital on employment underscores the importance of activation programmes and case management, as these young adults were not able to gain employment on their own.

➔ 5 Create secure labour markets and income

Many countries have seen a shift, both from passive to active labour market measures, as well as a shift towards more flexible or even turbulent labour markets (e.g. Bekker and van Deurzen 2020). Currently, finding a stable job can be a long-lasting and complex process, which might include internships, agency work, self-employment and spells of short-term employment (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Hartlapp and Schmidt 2008). Each time a young person makes a transition to or on the labour market, there is a risk at (temporary) unemployment. This could be solved by building better bridges from school-to-work and from job-to-job (Borghouts and Freese 2017).

The shift to active labour market measures entails a restructuring of unemployment benefits, installing penalties for refusing to accept a participation trajectory or particular job, or reducing other components of the social protection systems, while taking austerity measures (Jeliazkova et al. 2018). Success factors for youth policies seem to include the opposite: early intervention, support rather than compulsion, individualized and tailored support, integrated approaches, a focus on human capital

development and the offer of better opportunities (Jeliazkova et al. 2018; Unt and Gabel 2018). Youth programmes therefore should take concepts such as a 'good job' into account (Unt and Gabel, 2018). Now, significant mismatches exist between the aims of policy interventions and the drivers of youth unemployment, which leads to less effective measures. Some studies even show that active labour market policies (ALMPs) may contribute to the growth of underemployment or jobs with low quality, low-skill, low-pay, involuntary part-time and precarious employment (Unt and Gabel 2018). Young people are often affected by having little choice but accepting these 'second-best' jobs (Unt and Gabel 2018).

Additionally, governments should invest in proper education. Youth employment interventions cannot compensate for low quality education systems and a lack of adequate social investments (Unt and Gabel 2018). Moreover, in times of high unemployment, supply side measures are usually not the most suitable, if they are not supported by demand side measures (Chung et al. 2012; Hadjivassiliou 2017).

Conclusion/message

Overall, the message seems clear. If another wave of youth unemployment is upcoming, and the evidence for this is mounting, we need to be ready to offer youth a proper alternative, be it returning to school, doing an internship or stimulating companies to create jobs with a prospect. For youngsters who need more than just a quick intervention, valuing small steps towards the labour market is key. This means investing in adequate support and tailored programmes and to taking the time needed to make progress.

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