

1, 2, 3, 4, unemployed, 1, 2, 3, 4...

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THE FIGURES

One in five young people in the European Union is unemployed. The average youth unemployment rate hovers around 20% and it is twice as high as the average unemployment rate for the whole working population. In spite of a wide provision of education and training it takes years to find a full-time job that pays a living, and it is difficult to keep it. The economic crisis has hit young people harder and adds to the risks faced by young Europeans on their way towards independent living. Often enough it is not just a temporary delay on the individual pathway from learning to work, but 28% of the unemployed young people under 25 have been without a job for more than 12 months. The risk of unemployment is not spread evenly throughout the EU member states. While in Spain for example, the latest figures went up to almost 48%, countries such as Austria or Germany, the Netherlands and Norway with youth unemployment rates under 10% are already haunted by the skills shortage that is expected as a result of future demographic changes.

These figures are alarming for a couple of reasons. They are strong indicators for social, economic and individual risks. They are even more disturbing because they haven't changed despite the fact that for more than two decades now a system of schemes has been developed and funded, aiming to close the gap between school and the labour market. A variety of programmes support the so-called youth at risk with learning, training, work, competence and skills building, offering social support and career guidance. Yet, when looking at the latest Eurostat tables it seems as if labour and education policy aren't able to improve young people's chances of entering the employment system. Neither intensified and targeted career guidance nor the individualised support strategies guarantee better chances on the job or apprenticeship market.

For a long time therefore the prioritised strategy has been to provide extra training of work skills for those young people who were considered to be "low achievers", "slow learners", "disadvantaged" or "at the risk of becoming disaffected". Lately the discourse is changing. Instead of the familiar blame-the-victim argument calling for better learners the awareness of the social risks and costs of large-scale youth unemployment is rising.

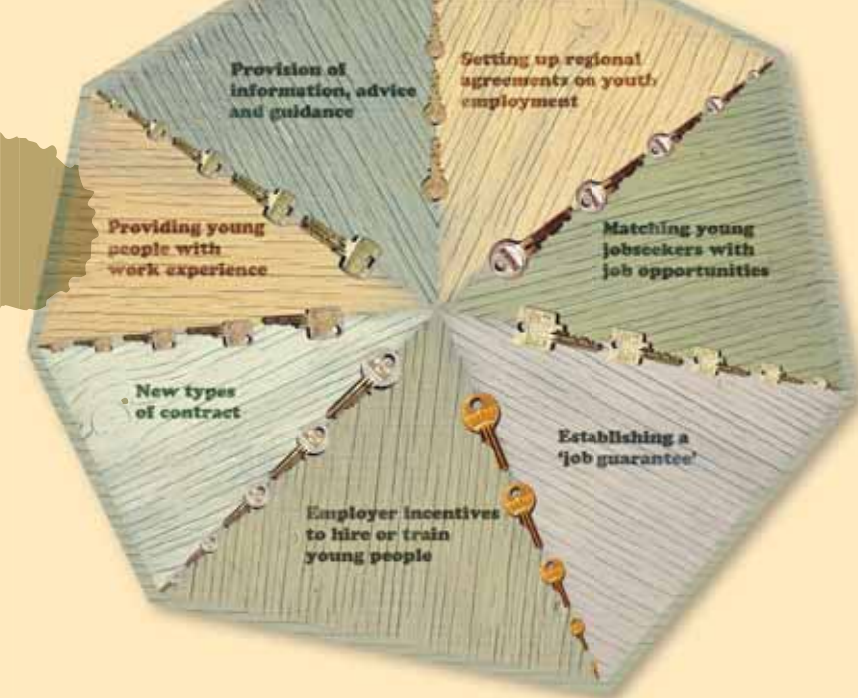
Unemployment at a young age creates a sense of uselessness for those concerned and could lead to delinquency, mental problems or drug abuse – these were the warnings of the International Labour Organization when commenting the worldwide development of youth unemployment on the International Youth Day in 2009. Adding to these social risks there is also considerable economic damage related to the exclusion of the next generation from the labour market. Savings may shrink as may the domestic demand for goods in general; social security systems will not have their premium payers.

Furthermore, exclusion from employment impacts other dimensions of social inclusion. While exclusion from the labour market certainly is the most important dimension of social participation, there is also economic exclusion, social exclusion, cultural exclusion, institutional exclusion and spatial exclusion, which determine one's ability and possibilities to engage in active citizenship. And even if young people are in employment, the terms and conditions of work leave them more vulnerable. In 2009 for example, 40.2% of the young people under 25 were on a temporary contract and 27.6% were involuntarily in part-time work. Being without employment often goes along with reduced access to social security or welfare support. In most of the member states the entitlement to unemployment benefits is related to a minimum of work experience, which young people usually don't have. Furthermore this precarious situation is not necessarily covered by social security systems.



BEHIND THE FIGURES

So there are many good reasons to place combating youth unemployment as the highest priority in European politics. But what works, and what doesn't?



In addition to the general lack of jobs and training places there is a mismatch between the educational system and the labour market. Closer links between education, training and the labour market, as seen in the apprenticeship model for example, seem to smooth the road into employment. The way how this linkage could be provided however, differs again according to national specificities. It depends on how vocational education and training are organised, who has responsibility for it, etc. In many EU member states, vocational education and training are considered to be the second best choice while the mainstream educational pathway leads to university. Improving the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) therefore is also an important aim. Again this applies to individuals but also refers to the recent reforms of VET which aim to improve the quality of work-based training and to create more places.

so-called disadvantaged young people or early school leavers to successfully apply for an apprenticeship. These schemes and programmes are not usually the result of an organic process but have been implemented very often with the financial support of the European Social Fund. They are special programmes, which run parallel to established forms of VET. The participants of these programmes are stigmatised as being something special, too. Although programmes widely differ in their educational approach (Evans/Niemeyer 2004), they can generally be seen as a kind of collecting basin for unemployed young people, which works as a safety net for both individuals and society. They serve to compensate for the evident and growing mismatch mentioned above and to keep young people occupied. They can be organised in a way that they offer individual support and enhance the development of personal and technical competences and the staff may be very committed to the educational aims. However, seen from a macro-perspective these schemes are inclusive and exclusive at the same time. They help to fine tune the selective mechanisms of the (vocational) education system. Participating in such a scheme still means being excluded from the "real", that is established and socially acknowledged, training and labour structures. Very often the young participants are well aware of this reality.

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The first and most common reaction was to extend schooling. To prolong school time serves as a kind of first aid for individuals who chose to continue education as a legitimate way out of a blocked road towards training and work. On the general level of educational policy the extension of the age of compulsory schooling also is the first solution to channel young people towards learning in times when there is not enough work available.

Policy approaches to combating youth unemployment for a long time have concentrated on education, training and career guidance. Recently, however, programmes targeted at the employment sector have been introduced in some of the EU member states. "Some countries have developed specific active labour market measures for young people. These span from the provision of information, advice and guidance (e.g. France, Malta and Iceland), to new types of contract (Luxembourg), employer incentives to hire or train young people (Luxembourg, Serbia), matching young jobseekers with job opportunities (the Netherlands), setting up

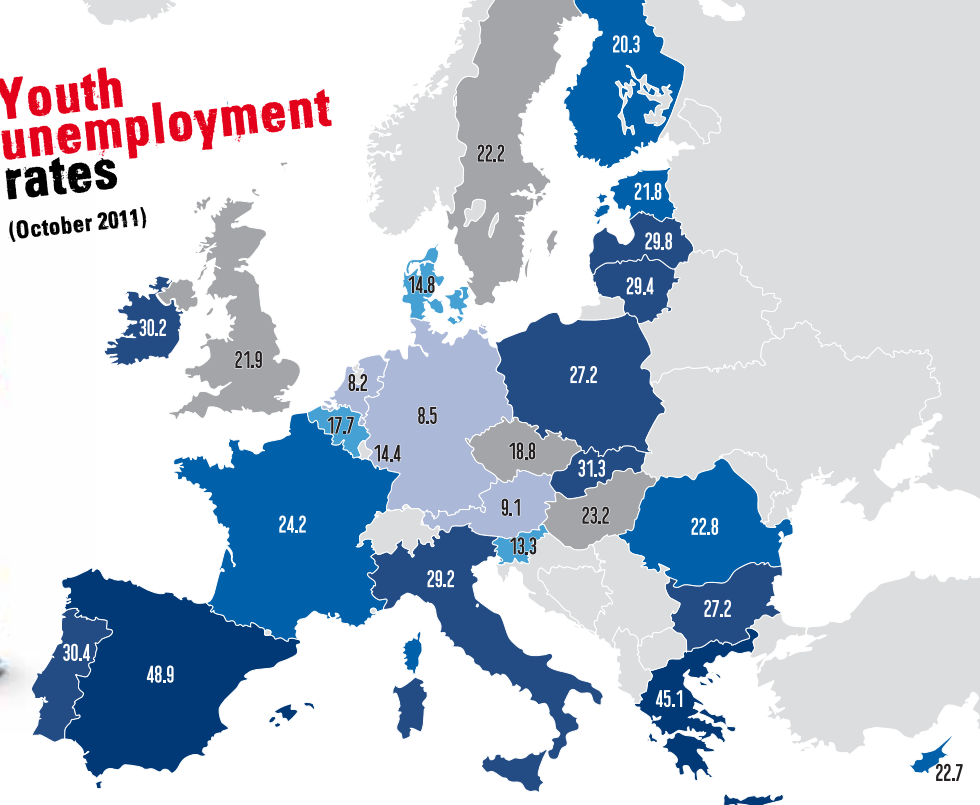
regional agreements or 'covenants' on youth employment (the Netherlands), providing young people with work experience (Slovakia, Sweden, as well as those countries mentioned above and establishing a 'job guarantee' for the young unemployed). In some cases, young people cannot claim benefits if they do not participate in the programmes on offer to them (the Netherlands, Iceland)." (European Employment Observatory Review 2011: 18)

In addition to these programmes the following activities are to be identified in the member states:

- improved and intensified career information, advice and guidance;
- incentives for employers hiring people aged 24 and younger;
- regional networks of stakeholders;
- support for self-employment;
- internships and early job placements may also facilitate access to the labour market – however they still may leave the young workers in vulnerable positions. And unfortunately the economic crisis impacts exactly on this most successful instrument.



Youth unemployment rates (October 2011)



Even if it seems as if young people have no right to make demands as to the quality of their job, it is important to think about the long-term effects of precarious working conditions and the growing accommodation to long-term internships. This type of job-orientation programme may rather reinforce labour market segmentation instead of smoothing young people's way into employment. Are programmes preparing young people to work under precarious conditions or are they enabling personal engagement and active ownership of careers? Do they provide the time and space which is necessary for orientation or do they rather frame and control those transitions, which are risky for both the young individuals and the society?

Just to clarify: even the best training programme and the most engaged pedagogical approach will

not be able to create one single job or solve the economic crisis. In a country where almost every second young person is without employment, support strategies on the pathway towards work need to be diversified and comprehensively targeted at all dimensions of social inclusion – placement rates won't work as a quality indicator then. Training teachers and trainers also goes into this direction.

Apart from training problems there are severe social questions related to youth unemployment. Given the crucial relationship between employment and social inclusion the question is how to enable the mass of young unemployed people to evolve and develop a sense of belonging instead of longing to belong while becoming used to the idea that there simply isn't a job for everyone?

Further reading:

European Commission (2011) European Employment Observatory Review: Youth employment measures, 2010, <http://www.eu-employment-observatory.net/resources/reviews/EEORReview-YEM2010.pdf>, accessed 21 April 2012.

Niemeyer, B. (2012) "The Impacts of European social Inclusion Policy on National Educational Systems", in: Stolz, Stefanie, Gonon, Philipp (eds.), *Challenges and Reforms in Vocational Education. Aspects of Inclusion and Exclusion*, Bern, Peter Lang.

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Evans, K.; Niemeyer, B. (eds) (2004) *Re-Connection. Countering Social Exclusion through situated Learning*, London, Kluwer Academic Publishers.