Youth unemployment: The race to zero

Young people in Europe are eager to move up, to work and to participate in society, but more than 3.6 million of them are in a precarious position. How can we reduce youth unemployment to close to zero within the coming years? Has Europe taken decisive action for a real crackdown?

Youth unemployment is decreasing but labour market problems persist

In spring 2013, the youth unemployment rate peaked at 23.8% and then declined sharply. In January 2018, the rate was at 16.1% (Eurostat) meaning that 3.64 million young people (under 25) were unemployed in the European Union (EU). There has thus been a significant improvement in the past few years. Nevertheless, huge imbalances persist between EU Member States. The lowest rates were observed in the Czech Republic (5.8%) and Germany (6.6%) while the highest were recorded in Greece (43.7%, November 2017, latest data available), Spain (36.0%) and Italy (31.5%). Youth unemployment still remains high compared to other age groups: young people are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than people 25 years and older (6.4%). They are also more affected than other age groups by long-term unemployment. The young are at much greater risk in terms of precariousness: 43.8% of youth employees (15-24) were on temporary contracts, and 32.4% had part-time jobs in 2016. Last but not least, high youth unemployment rates sometimes co-exist with difficulties in filling job vacancies, pointing to a skills mismatch.

Tackling youth unemployment: Is enough being done?

In 2014, the European Parliament warned that significant sustainable economic growth in the EU requires inequalities to be reduced, and recalled the importance of reducing unemployment, especially youth unemployment, and alleviating poverty. A series of initiatives aims to reduce youth unemployment in the EU. Investing in youth. The Youth Guarantee (YG) seeks to ensure that all EU Member States make a good-quality offer – to all people up to age 25 – of a job, continued education, an apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. The YG aims to enable young people to find a job suited to their education, skills and experience, or to acquire the education, skills and experience to increase their chances of finding a job. Since 2014, significant EU investment has supported its establishment in Member States – most notably from the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI, €8 billion in total from 2014 to 2020). Early this year, Parliament stressed the need to transform the YEI into a more stable EU funding instrument and to improve the quality of offers under the YEI and YG.

Quality apprenticeships and traineeships. Effective vocational education and training systems, with a strong work-based learning component, appear to facilitate the transition of young people from education to work. Launched in 2013, the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, is to improve the quality and supply of apprenticeships across the EU and to change mind-sets towards apprenticeship-type learning. In parallel, so that young people can gain high-quality work experience in safe and fair conditions, and increase their employability, Member States agreed on a Quality Framework for Traineeships (2014).

Labour mobility. The EU facilitates labour mobility, in particular by making young people aware of job opportunities in other EU countries. Your first EURES Job (YfEj) is a platform that brings together the CVs of young jobseekers – aged 18 to 35, from all EU-28 countries plus Norway and Iceland, interested in finding professional experience abroad – and job/traineeship vacancies of employers looking for young workers.

Volunteering. The new European Solidarity Corps aims at creating opportunities for young people to volunteer or work in solidarity-related projects which benefit communities and people around Europe.

This note has been prepared for the European Youth Event, taking place in Strasbourg in June 2018.