Youth employment: the EU measures to make it work

Youth unemployment remains a key concern in Europe. Find out what measures the EU has put in place to help.

Employment and youth policies are the responsibility of member states. However, the EU has launched a number of initiatives complementing national policies as part of its measures to create a more social Europe.

This support focuses on funding youth employment programmes, improving the quality of apprenticeships and traineeships, offering international education and job opportunities and making it easier for young people to take part in volunteering projects.
Youth unemployment in numbers

The unsuccessful search for work and training opportunities creates feelings of isolation, dependence and uselessness in young people. Apart from this, there are negative effects on the economy and on an ageing society.

Young people were amongst the hardest hit by the 2008 economic and financial crisis with the unemployment rate of people under 25 in the EU peaking at almost 25% in early 2013 and levels of more than 50% in Greece and Spain. That had dropped to a record low of around 14% in 2019, but the corona pandemic pushed it up to 18.2% in 2021. However, recently there were signs of improvement, with youth unemployment down to 17.3% in May 2021 from 18.2% in April.

Funding youth employment programmes

Part of the broader Youth Employment Support Package, the reinforced Youth Guarantee is an EU initiative to give everyone under 30 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.

The Youth Employment Initiative is the EU’s main tool to help finance measures and programmes put in place by EU countries to carry out Youth Guarantee schemes, such as training and assistance for the young to find their first job, along with incentives for employers. The initiative especially supports regions in the EU that have a youth unemployment rate above 25%.

The Youth Employment Initiative was integrated into the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), for the 2021-2027 period. EU countries with a rate of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) above the EU average should devote at least 12.5% of their ESF+ resources to young people.

Quality apprenticeships and traineeships

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships platform was launched to support the Youth Guarantee and improve the quality of apprenticeships in Europe.

In July 2020, the European Commission launched a renewed version of the platform, focusing on digital and green apprenticeships that will facilitate the transition to a climate-neutral Europe.

International opportunities

In the EU, member states are responsible for higher education policies and training systems. The EU can help by coordinating between them and support their efforts through funding or policy cooperation.
Initiated in 1999, the intergovernmental Bologna Process has facilitated the mutual recognition of diplomas in higher education across 48 countries. Today, there is a European process of non-binding mutual recognition of bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees.

In 2018, to promote the recognition process further, EU countries adopted a recommendation on promoting the mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas across borders. Member states are encouraged to take steps to introduce the automatic recognition of diplomas by 2025.

Different tools that can help to support recognition of qualifications and facilitate cross-border validation of training and lifelong learning certificates already exist in the EU. These include:

- The European Qualifications Framework is a non-legally binding tool that helps to compare qualifications systems in Europe
- Europass is a set of key documents, including a Europe-wide standardised CV template and language passport, that makes it easier to compare your education and work experience internationally
- established to facilitate validation and recognition of work-related skills and knowledge acquired in different systems and countries

The EU aims to build a European Education Area to enable all young people to receive quality education and training and find jobs across the continent.

The EU’s programme in the fields of education, training, youth and sport is called Erasmus+, focusing on mobility and transnational cooperation. Started as a student exchange programme in 1987, it has become an umbrella programme covering school and higher education, vocational education and training, adult learning, youth non-formal and informal learning, and sports.

Erasmus+ enables students to study abroad, provides teaching and training opportunities for staff working in the education sector, supports traineeships and youth exchanges. Organisations, such as schools, universities, youth organisations, can also receive funding to create strategic partnerships and alliances with organisations from other countries.

The new Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027 was adopted by Parliament 18 May 2021. MEPs secured an additional €1.7 billion in funding during negotiations with the Council, which brings the total budget to more than €28 billion. This is nearly double the funding for the previous programme. It focuses on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions and enabling more disadvantaged people to participate.
The Your first Eures Job initiative aims to promote labour mobility by making young people aware of job opportunities in other EU countries.

A platform brings together job/traineeship vacancies of employers looking for young workers and the CVs of young jobseekers, aged 18 to 35 from all EU countries plus Norway and Iceland.

Volunteering opportunities

Officially launched at the end of 2016, the European Solidarity Corps finances volunteering activities, traineeships and jobs for young people in projects benefitting communities and people around Europe until the end 2020. By September 2019, more than 161,000 young people had already registered to take part.

In May 2021 MEPs approved the new programme for 2021-2027. It now includes humanitarian aid and will be a stand-alone volunteering programme with its own budget for the first time.

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