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## Article

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## Non-formal Learning And The Acquisition Of Skills – How Does The EU Support Youth Employment?

### Abstract

*In recent years the issue of youth unemployment has been identified as one of the most pressing for young people, who are affected particularly hard by the economic crisis in the European Union. In response, the EU institutions have designed and introduced a complex mix of political instruments, agencies, programmes and studies that are supposed to establish a complementary and systemic approach to education and youth policies. Youth policy, as a socio-economic field of EU political intervention began in 2014 to be subject to a paradigm of employability and “the economy of fighting the crisis”, including issues such as non-formal and informal learning and youth work outside of schooling systems. Thus the EU policy in question has significantly shifted from “personal and cultural development, and inspiring a sense of active citizenship among young people,” as it was formulated in the Youth in Action Programme 2006-2013, towards “the acquisition of professional skills of youth workers, validation systems of non-formal learning, and greater complementarities with formal education and training”, as it is formulated in the Youth Sector of the EU programme for Education – Erasmus+ 2014-2020. The objective of this article is to provide a comparative insight into the context that frames the design of EU policies aimed at mitigating the phenomenon of unemployment among young people, and to show how this has changed in light of the new EU programming period.*

**Keywords:** youth unemployment, EU policy instruments, job-related skills, transversal skills, non-formal education, youth work, education and training

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of youth unemployment in the European Union is not new, but only in the recent years it has attracted significant political attention from the EU leaders, who characterised it as precariousness and a hollowing out of opportunity for quality employment (see: Goldrin, Guidoum 2011). As shown by comparative statistics collected in the EU Member States, for the last 20 years in Europe youth unemployment has been double and sometimes triple the rate of overall unemployment (Mourshed, Patel, Suder 2014, p. 1). Still, only in the recent years has this issue been identified as pressing, with young people being affected particularly hard by the economic crisis, like but more so than any other social group. At the end of 2012 nearly six million people in Europe under the age of 25 were unemployed,<sup>1</sup> and the youth unemployment rate was more almost two-and-a-half times the adult one – 23.3% against 9.3%. A total of 7.5 million young people were defined in the group of “NEETs”. This term stands for those who are “Not in Employment, Education, or Training”, and they are recognized as one of the key target groups of the EU education and youth policy.

The EU Youth Report issued in 2012 noted the following trends as regards the socio-economic situation of youth in the EU:

1. More school, less work (while the share of students is going up, that of young employees is going down);
2. Increase in the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs);
3. Increasingly difficult labour market (during times of economic crisis, highly-skilled individuals have a better chance of finding a job);
4. Fewer early school leavers (progress has been made in reducing the share of early school leavers to reach the headline target of less than 10 % by 2020).

The elimination of national borders and of restrictions on the free movement of people, goods, services and capital has followed the establishment of the European Common Market in 1992. Since the problem of unemployment has become pan-European, and inasmuch as it mirrors structural changes in the EU economy and society, the right question to ask is whether this is the result of lack of jobs, insufficient mobility of individuals on the common market, lack of skills, or maybe rather lack of political coordination? In 2013 the Committee of the Regions (CoR) expressed its conviction that the fight against youth unemployment was undoubtedly one of the most serious problems facing the

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Working together for Europe’s young people – A call to action on youth unemployment, COM(2013) 447 final, Brussels 2013, p. 2

EU, hence it urgently demanded a coordinated and systematic political response<sup>2</sup> involving all relevant public and private stakeholders.

The report delivered in 2014 by McKinsey & Company demonstrated that European youth face three significant hurdles on their “education-to-employment” (E2E) path. It can be described as a road with three intersections: (1) enrolling in post-secondary education; (2) building the right skills; and (3) finding a suitable job. Due to the EU legal framework and the governance measures that it implements (such as the Open Method of Coordination), the EU as a *polity* can be mostly involved in the process of skills-building, be they of a vocational or non-formal nature. In fact, the whole EU education policy - and the youth sector within it - have been defined in terms of skills and competences and the capacity building of participating individuals and institutions.

When searching for the underlying reasons for the current situation, the European Commission identifies significant skills mismatches on Europe's labour market, such as the fact that despite the crisis there are over 2 million unfilled vacancies in the EU.<sup>3</sup> European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability, and are not working adequately with businesses or employers to bring the learning experience closer to the reality of the working environment.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the McKinsey & Company report in 2014 also demonstrated that while there are more people looking for work, employers in Europe cannot find the skilled workers they need. According to their analyses, in Europe 74% of education providers were confident that their graduates were prepared for work, but only 38 percent of youth and 35 percent of employers agreed with their assessment (Mourshed, Patel, Suder, p. 2). These skills mismatches are a growing concern with respect to European industry's competitiveness. It is thus no wonder that youth employment has become a top priority for the European Union.

It has been commonly underlined that youth unemployment has a significant impact not only on individuals, but also on society and the economy as a whole, having implications for social cohesion. The Committee of the Regions (CoR), in its 2014 opinion “Quality Framework for Traineeships”, underlined that the extremely wide variation in unemployment rates between regions was undermining the European Union's social and territorial cohesion objectives.

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<sup>2</sup> Committee of the Regions, Youth Employment Package, EDUC-V-032, Brussels 2013, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion service, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1036&langId=d> (31/1.2015).

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes, COM(2012) 669 final, Strasbourg 2012, p. 2.

“The economy and fighting the crisis” is at the top of the EU priorities, and it is concomitant with what is expected by the Europeans themselves – half of them spontaneously mentioned fighting the crisis as the main task of the EU by positively influencing employment (19%), the quality of life (13%), and economic stability (9%). As we can read in the Eurobarometer on “European Citizenship” in 2013<sup>5</sup>: “Employment has gained ground among expectations of the European Union.”

## 2. Employability measures in political instruments

As was stated by the European Commission and subsequently supported by the Committee of the Regions in 2014, if the target set in the Europe 2020 Strategy - achieving an employment rate of 75% of the 20 to 64 age group by 2020 - is to be realistic, then youth education must be improved, i.e. better targeted to the needs of the labour market and supporting the acquisition of relevant skills such as the digital skills that are expected to be required in 90% of jobs in the nearest future.<sup>6</sup> As the CoR underscored, coordinated and multi-level political action is a must in order to ease the transition from education to work by boosting the supply of high quality apprenticeships and traineeships and addressing skills’ shortages. The European targets set forth in the Europe 2020 Strategy in the field of education concern early childhood education and early school leaving; basic skills acquisition; completion of higher education; lifelong learning support; transition to the labour market; education, training and job-related mobility between countries; and last but not least – raising youth employability rates.

Since in all Member States young people tend to be more affected by unemployment than their elders (Paz 2012, p. 3, in: Dietrich 2012, p. 13), the phenomena of youth unemployment manifests some particular characteristics compared to unemployment among any other social groups. According to Martin Paz this is due to the fact that young people are the future adult labour force, therefore Europe's strategy has become to help especially young people to enter and remain in the labour market and to acquire and develop the skills that will facilitate their employment. Given the scale of youth unemployment since the current economic crisis began, the European Employment Strategy 2020 identified tackling unemployment in this group is a priority (Paz 2012, pp. 6-7). Within the framework of the European Strategy 2020 “Youth on the Move” a range

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<sup>5</sup> Standard Barometer 79, European Citizenship. Report, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79\\_citizen\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_citizen_en.pdf), 2013

<sup>6</sup> Committee of the Regions, Quality Framework for Traineeships, ECOS-V-053, Brussels 2014, p. 3.

of measures are established, aimed at promoting young people in working and studying abroad. In short the objective is to get young people back into work, education or training.<sup>7</sup>

In 2009, the Council endorsed the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), known as the EU Youth Strategy<sup>8</sup> which contains the following objectives: (1) to create more and equal opportunities for all young people in education and in the labour market; and (2) to promote active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity of all young people. The EU Youth Strategy advocates a cross-cutting approach, branching out into the following eight different fields of action: Education and Training, Employment and Entrepreneurship, Social Inclusion, Health and Well-being, Participation, Culture and Creativity, Volunteering, and Youth and the World. The EU Youth Strategy and its implementation are based on the Open Method of Coordination.<sup>9</sup>

As Jacqueline O'Reilly from the Business School in Brighton has claimed, understanding youth unemployment cannot be limited only to the sphere of economic production and a narrow focus on skills attainment, but it also needs to incorporate other phenomena in order to better understand how the different trajectories for young people have been created and are being reproduced. Therefore O'Reilly and her team, in a large-scale FP7 research project<sup>10</sup> examining obstacles and opportunities affecting youth employment in Europe, took into account the nature and mechanisms of flexicurity regimes and how they contribute to achieving economic and social independence, as well as the implications of unemployment in the longer term regarding healthcare, psychological well-being, pensions, etc.

In December 2012 the Commission called on Member States to ensure that all young Europeans receive, within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed, either a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship. The Commission's package, entitled the "Youth Employment Package", came with a budget of 6 billion EUR and Country-Specific Recommendations issued by the Commission. It was further stated that since the best results in terms of youth employment are seen in countries where young people have the chance to take part in high-quality

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<sup>7</sup> idem.

<sup>8</sup> Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) (2009/C 311/01), OJ C 311, Brussels 2009, pp. 1-11.

<sup>9</sup> EU Youth Report, Status of the situation of young people in the European Union, Accompanying the document "Draft 2012 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018)", SWD(2012) 257 final, Brussels 2012, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.style-research.eu/>

traineeships,<sup>11</sup> the Youth Employment Package should support traineeships co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) 2014-2020 and targeting young people from the Union's regions worst affected by youth unemployment.<sup>12</sup> It declared that the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) within the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020 should have a crucial role to play in supporting young people and implementing the Youth Guarantee with a minimum share of 25% of cohesion policy funding for the ESF to ensure that at least EUR 80 billion remains available for investment in Europe's human capital investment in young people through the European Social Fund.<sup>13</sup> This approach reflects the priority that the EU attaches to fighting and preventing youth unemployment and, as in case of the entire ESIF, this paradigm of fighting the crisis is described as an investment. According to the European Commission, it is essential to boost growth and competitiveness inasmuch as skills will determine Europe's capacity to increase productivity. Skills can trigger innovation and growth, move production up the value chain, stimulate the concentration of higher level skills and shape the labour market.<sup>14</sup>

Policy strategies in the youth field in the European Union are therefore expected to respond to the current situation and the effects it may have on society, the economy, and public finances. The phenomena should be therefore analysed in the broader context of social, cultural, industrial and innovation policies, and in a multi-level perspective as it requires engagement from multiple public and private institutions operating on diverse levels of governance and involved in different sectors of education. But it is the European Commission which remains the political centre and the policy-maker, as it holds numerous political instruments such as: Eurostat, the EURYDICE Network that provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies;<sup>15</sup> the European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Cedefop)<sup>16</sup> Joint Research Centre, also called "the Commission's Science Hub", which aims to improve policy knowledge of education and training systems;<sup>17</sup> the EU Skills Panorama collecting data, information and intelligence on trends for skills and jobs across Europe;<sup>18</sup> the European Sector Skills Councils designed to anticipate the need for skills in specific

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission, Moving Youth into Employment, SWD(2012) 406 final, COM(2012) 727 final

<sup>12</sup> Committee of the Regions, Quality Framework for Traineeships, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, Working together for Europe's young people, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, Rethinking Education: Investing in skills, op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://euskillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/default.aspx>

sectors more effectively and achieve a better match between skills and labour market needs;<sup>19</sup> the Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning (CRELL), which combines expertise in the fields of economics, econometrics, education, social sciences and statistics in an interdisciplinary approach to research in order to guide policy-makers and steer Member States towards increased effectiveness, efficiency and equity in their education and training systems.<sup>20</sup> The Commission also supports the Education and Training Monitor (ETM), which is an annual series that reports on the evolution of education and training systems across Europe. ETM collects quantitative and qualitative data and is supposed to support the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) by strengthening the evidence-base and by linking it more closely to the broader Europe 2020 strategy and the country-specific recommendations adopted by the Council as part of the 2014 European Semester.<sup>21</sup>

Another group of policy instruments refer to the acquisition of skills. The European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) identifies and categorises skills, competences, qualifications and occupations and is linked to relevant international classifications and frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF),<sup>22</sup> and in turn the EQF is supposed to help compare national qualifications systems to make them more understandable across different countries and systems in Europe.<sup>23</sup> The EU also promotes the use of Europass, which is a set of five standardised documents and a skills passport available for free in 26 languages,<sup>24</sup> and a “youth-work-friendly” instrument called Youthpass – a European recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning in youth work.<sup>25</sup>

By designing and using the above-mentioned instruments, the EU institutions seek to provide a complementary and systemic approach to education and youth policies that, after 2014 being subject to the paradigm of employability and “the economy of fighting the crisis” as the EU top priority, is manifested by an explicit shift of education and training towards market requirements in the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=784&langId=en>

<sup>20</sup> <https://crell.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>21</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/et-monitor\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/tools/et-monitor_en.htm)

<sup>22</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/esco/home>

<sup>23</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/home>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.youthpass.eu/en/youthpass/>



In pursuance of the Open Method of Coordination, the EU institutions are to set the frameworks for youth policy, while national, local and regional governments, together with educational institutions, civil society organisations and enterprises, should implement its goals. In some fashion all levels of governance of the EU policy are financially and politically encouraged to realize such policies with the common vision of “fighting the crisis together”. This process will depend, however, on the political will of the Member States within their active labour market policies and support for training and apprenticeships, as well as on the capacity of the private sector, especially SMEs, to create opportunities for young people<sup>26</sup> in line within the EU priorities. On the other hand, as Jo Shaw noted, some of the current concepts implemented at the supranational level are more likely to be seen as a provocation and a threat to the continued existence and relevance of the Member States, under whose protective umbrella (however leaky) citizens still want to take refuge in times of crisis. The voices calling for free movement to be given greater prominence and in particular for the mobility of young people to be supported in order to combat youth unemployment are very much minority voices (Shaw 2012, pp. 13-14), even though according to the EU leaders as many Europeans as possible must participate in inter-cultural education and training because it enables them to adapt to the changes brought about by the integration of states and to better understand each other through lifelong learning (Meung-Hoan 2004, p. 10).

### 3. Youth policy and the acquisition of skills

In many advanced countries, such as the EU Member States, there has always been a considerable concern about the quality and quantity of workforce skills. As Andrews, Bradley and Stott put it, this concern stems from the view that a highly skilled workforce is necessary for survival in an increasingly competitive world market, as well as from the view that the pace of skill-based technological change generates a need for an adaptable and flexible workforce (Andrews, Bradley, Stott 2002). As the EC claims, education needs to encourage the transversal skills (**entrepreneurship, digital skills, and language**) needed to ensure that young people are able to adapt to the inevitable changes in the labour market during their career.<sup>27</sup> The European Union, when promoting

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<sup>26</sup> European Commission, Working together, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, Rethinking Education, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

entrepreneurship as a key competence,<sup>28</sup> highlights the importance of advancing a “European entrepreneurial culture”. As a result, entrepreneurship education is now being increasingly encouraged across Europe.<sup>29</sup> The McKinsey & Company report completes this picture by demonstrating that young people are often not learning a sufficient portfolio of general skills while they study, with employers reporting a particular shortage of soft skills such as spoken communication and a work ethic.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, according to the report employers and education providers should work together closely to address this problem at its roots.

With the introduction of the EU youth policy within the framework of the Youth in Action (YiA) Program in 2007, with a budget of 885 million Euro for seven years’ duration, non-formal learning and education, provided in the form of youth exchanges, youth initiatives, and voluntary services and trainings, was defined as learning outside institutional contexts, aimed at providing space for association, activity and dialogue, as well as support and opportunities for young people (13-30 years of age) as they move from childhood to adulthood. Learning was supposed to enable youth to acquire essential skills and competences and contribute to their personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship, thereby improving their employment prospects. Learning activities were to provide an added value not only for a particular young person, but also for the society and the economy as a whole, as it is claimed in EU Youth Strategy and in the Education and Training 2020 document (ET2020). In terms of quantitative results, YiA enabled more than 200,000 young people and youth workers per year to exercise non-formal learning mobility across the EU and in 140 countries beyond by getting involved in educational activities outside schools.<sup>31</sup> It was strongly underscored that being involved in YiA projects placed the participants in an intercultural setting and empowered them and raised their awareness of being European.<sup>32</sup> The Programme set out to achieve five main objectives, tackled through five main actions: (1) Youth for Europe: youth exchanges and local initiatives; (2) European Voluntary Service: voluntary activities abroad; (3) Youth in the World: promoting partnerships among young people from the EU and Partner Countries; (4) Youth Support Systems aimed at youth workers

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<sup>28</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, 2006/962/WE, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32006H0962&from=PL> (31/1/2015).

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, Focus on: Young people and entrepreneurship, European good practice, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Committee of the Regions, Youth Employment Package, EDUC-V-032, Brussels 2013, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, Focus on: Young citizens of Europe. European good practice projects, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg 2013, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, p.4.

and organisations; (5) Support for European Co-operation in the Youth Field: policy cooperation and dialogue. The programme is estimated to have supported around 8,000 projects and to have provided opportunities and experiences to around 150,000 young people and youth workers every year.<sup>33</sup>

The evaluation of the programme was carried out in 2011 while it was underway, and besides providing quantitative data on its performance (like the number of projects submitted – 42,700, or projects granted – 21,800)<sup>34</sup>, it showed probably more relevant long-term outcomes, such as the level of impact of the participation in the YiA programme on future educational and professional perspectives, with over 70% of respondents agreeing with the following statements: “*I have a clearer idea about my professional career aspirations and goals*”, and “*I believe that my job chances have increased*”. The average appreciation by youth of the extent to which they had increased their competences proved also very promising, with the top three categories being (1) Communication in foreign languages, (2) Social and civic competences, and (3) Cultural awareness and expression. As far as the impact on youth organisations, the following results were measured: increased appreciation of cultural diversity, project management competence, and the extent to which their projects were perceived as enrichment by the local environment and community.

#### **4. Trends in the EU education policy**

In 2014, with the introduction of the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2014-2020 and the Erasmus+ Programme, young people, employers, and education providers had to follow a different paradigm. They were told that skills gained thanks to informal and non-formal learning should, in the first place, facilitate acquisition of the ability to plan, implement and evaluate work and experiences. In 2014 the CoR underlined the importance of validation procedures for skills acquired outside the formal education system as a vital part of fundamental changes to the European model for vocational education and training,<sup>35</sup> recalling the previously

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<sup>33</sup> Decision No 1719/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing the ‘Youth in Action’ programme for the period 2007 to 2013, L 327/31, Official Journal of the European Union.

<sup>34</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/2011-monitoring-main-results\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/youth/tools/documents/2011-monitoring-main-results_en.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Committee of the Regions, Recognition of skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning, EDUC-V-043, Brussels 2014, p.1.

-established European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning.<sup>36</sup> These pan-European principles were designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries<sup>37</sup>.

With regard to non-formal and informal learning, the policy in question has significantly shifted its focus from the personal and cultural development of young people, as was the case in the Youth in Action Programme 2006-2013, towards the acquisition of professional skills by young workers, validation systems of non-formal learning, and greater complementarities with formal education and training, as can be observed in the Youth Sector of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 – the EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, with a global budget of 14,774 billion Euro, that is supposed to deliver a results-driven “real life projects”. This new approach was determined to be necessary in view of a whole combination of negative factors, such as: the economic crisis, high youth unemployment, skills gaps, low employability of graduates, a growing demand for highly skilled employees, a global competition for talent, and the internationalisation of education. At the same time it made use of an extraordinary offer to broaden learning and the potential of ICT and that of complementarity between formal, informal and non-formal learning. All this was designed due to build closer links with the priorities of the world of work in the youth field and exert a positive impact on the EU economy.

Erasmus+ supports activities in all fields of education, training, youth and sport, including Higher Education, VET, Adult Education and the School sector. It was decided to make use of the positive connotations that Europeans revealed towards the “Erasmus student exchange” programme, and designated as “Erasmus+” the entire range of EU educational policy for students, youth, children at school, academic staff, adult learners, youth workers, etc. Besides supporting the “obvious” education providers across the EU (schools and universities), the programme finances or co-finances transnational projects proposed by youth organisations, research centres, local and regional authorities, and almost any other organisation that can prove that their activities or their project proposal complies with the programme. The range of participating countries has been expanded in 2014 by involving FYROM, EEA countries, Turkey and Partner Countries from the Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean, Western Balkans and Russia.

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<sup>36</sup> The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) is the European Union’s reference centre for vocational education and training.

<sup>37</sup> European Inventory on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2009, [http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/4054_en.pdf) (31 January 2015).

This educational programme is claimed to bring “more cooperation for more innovation” and is to be achieved via 25,000 cross-sectoral strategic partnerships, 300 Knowledge and Sector Skills Alliances,<sup>38</sup> 1,000 Capacity Building Projects, etc. Nevertheless, these numbers do not reveal the real impact to such an extent as would be possible taking into account such indicators as: youth job-placement rates, career developments of the programme participants, or employer satisfaction with the graduates of different Erasmus+ activities. As far as the Youth sector in Erasmus+ is concerned, its goal is still to improve the level of key competences and skills of young people and youth workers, and to promote democratic participation in Europe and in the labour market through active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion and solidarity. Activities must develop and embed new methods, tools or materials in order to build young people’s key competences, basic skills, language and IT skills, and new youth work approaches, including strategies to tackle social exclusion and early school leaving, and new methods, tools or materials to build capacity and professionalise or modernise youth work by the use of ICT, virtual mobility, online learning, and reform of the youth work curricula. All the projects under Erasmus+ must demonstrate, in order to be financed, their relevance to the objectives of the programme, the specific Action they tackle, EU strategic documents and recommendations, and the EU agenda (relevance is 30% of the evaluation criteria).

The trends in the Erasmus+ programme for education and training and in the youth sector until 2020 may be summarised as follows:

1. There has been a shift from “inspiring a sense of active citizenship and tolerance among young Europeans and to involve them in shaping the Union’s future” (YiA 2007-2013) to “initiatives fostering entrepreneurship and social commitment” (Erasmus+ 2014-2020).
2. Education and training, in face of the current context of high youth unemployment, are gaining more and more importance in the EU policy agenda as a way to invest in human capital.
3. Youth activities are more job-oriented and market-oriented than before, with more complementarities between formal, informal and non-formal learning required.
4. Emphasis is placed on fostering strategic cross-sectoral cooperation between public and private institutions for better exchanges of practice, appropriate curricula and skills provision and a real-life approach.
5. Emphasis is placed on promoting work-based learning, including quality traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models, as well as building

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<sup>38</sup> Knowledge and Sector Skills Alliances in Erasmus+ are large-scale structured partnerships between education and training establishments (mostly academia) and business.

learning mobility more systematically into curricula (“embedded mobility”) to help the transition from learning to work.

6. Projects are expected to be more results-driven and output-oriented.
7. Pedagogical approaches and methodologies should be aimed at delivering transversal competences, the entrepreneurship mindset and creative thinking, and better exploiting ICT.
8. There should be more focus on Strategic Partnerships instead of individual projects and mobilities, by designing long-term development plans of participating institutions.
9. Emphasis is placed on increasing the compliance of youth work and non-formal education with the general political EU agenda is required for more strategic solutions and support for a systemic approach to education and youth policies.
10. Emphasis is placed on increasing the complexity of agencies and political instruments to be included when planning a transnational cooperation financed by the programme (such as: ESCO, EQF, Europass, Youthpass, Eurostat, EURYDICE, Cedefop, etc.)
11. Emphasis is placed on increasing the number of potential partners in the EU and in the Partner Countries, strengthening cooperation with third countries and focusing on EU neighbouring countries.

The trends visible in the Erasmus+ programme reflect the current EU paradigm of fighting the crisis, as is manifested by the explicit shift of education and training towards market requirements. This trend is especially easy to recognize with regard to the youth sector and youth work, together with simultaneous decreasing emphasis placed on intercultural competences, self-expression and bottom-up initiatives.

EU institutions obviously need to involve public/private stakeholders and institutions in order to achieve any systemic approach, validate the capacity of non-formal and informal learning, and achieve mutual recognition of market-oriented skills. In consequence, a complex system of agencies and political instruments has been designed in recent years that are aimed at facilitating this political and socio-economic process. It seems that with the support of all the research centres and instruments (Education and Training Monitor, Centre for Research on Education and Lifelong Learning, Joint Research Centre, etc.), EU policy makers should be able to provide all institutional stakeholders, as well as individual job seekers, with the required recognition of employment trends in particular sectors and developments in the area of skills. However, these instruments remain mostly unknown to the public or considered as inadequate, inaccessible or uninteresting, and hard to find and apply to real life.

## 5. Conclusions

In 2015 we are still at the starting point of implementation of the EU youth policy in its current form. The new EU programmes, such as Erasmus+, were defined in the form of goals to be achieved, accompanied by indicators that are both quantitative or qualitative in nature. In case of quantitative indicators Erasmus+ will be evaluated by the number of Strategic Partnerships or Knowledge Alliances established, new institutions involved, individual mobilities carried out, and Intellectual Outputs produced. With reference to qualitative indicators, the participating youth and adult learners, trainers, VET instructors, academic staff, NGO members, employment agencies, local and regional authorities, policy makers and others are supposed to raise their transversal skills (literacy, digital and language) and contribute to the implementation of EU instruments in the youth policy field. In contrast to the Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013, which was aimed at "inspiring a sense of active citizenship and tolerance among young Europeans", a significant shift in Erasmus+ has been made towards the "acquisition of market-related skills". The trends in Erasmus+ reflect the EU policy framework as it was set out in Europe 2020 and Education and Training 2020 Strategies and in The Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2010-2018).

If education in the EU is supposed to serve as investment, then it needs to deliver policies based on concrete evidence. What will be needed in the upcoming years are comparative analyses on the performance of countries and regions, and institutions and youth organisations implementing the Erasmus+ programme, as well as of administrative bodies implementing policy measures in order to further separate out those factors and measures that make a difference, namely those that are actually results-driven, taking into account that the Erasmus+ Youth programme is only one part of the EU instruments designed to combat youth unemployment.

As the Eurobarometer shows, citizens expect the EU to take efficient action to combat the present situation which is characterised by precariousness and affects all the Member States. Nowadays the European Union is said to have a critical role to play in building support structures that allow the best educational interventions to scale upward and reach the greatest number of young people, as well as provide labour-market information to capture employment trends and help institutional decision makers, employers, and job seekers make better decisions on which gaps need to be filled. Another task for the EU is to ameliorate the European Qualifications Framework in order to make vocational qualifications transferable across borders, and provide for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning that facilitates cross-border worker mobility, boosts competitiveness and enhances territorial and social

cohesion. The strategy behind this is that by making job-related qualifications (together with non-formal and cross-cutting competences) transferable across borders, the chances to improve the quality and the flow of educational and labour mobility rise. Last, but not least, the EU is expected to make sure that the information on relevant practices with respect to matching labour-market demand and supply is shared among stakeholders in order to help regional and national public-employment services compare their successful interventions. With use of the Open Method of Coordination and tools like the European Panorama<sup>39</sup> it can promote the sharing of best practices throughout Europe so as to help the Member States formulate minimum requirements for traineeships, cross-sectoral cooperation, policy support etc. based on such practices.

On the other hand, the current EU economic and political crisis has undermined citizens' trust that "more Europe" is going to solve all their problems, as the European integration process appears to many to be as much part of the problem as it is likely to be part of the solution (Shaw 2012, p. 1). It is therefore true that what is needed to help gain back trust towards the European integration project, is probably not more strategic political solutions proposed by the EU institutions, or sets of new objectives, initiatives, key benchmarks and indicators, studies, international surveys, and analyses - but instead delivery of tangible results in terms of raising youth employability.

This article has tackled the issue of youth employment in the European Union mostly by making reference to initiatives that promote non-formal education and the acquisition of the so-called transversal skills – such as Erasmus+. The analysis presented shows that such programmes should not be considered as regular employment instruments that are well known in the Member States and their local labour offices, but that they should rather serve to **create opportunities that in a long run will raise employability of young people, who will be equipped with the skills required on the market**. The EU has defined its youth entrepreneurship indicators as: measuring the share of self-employed young people; and dissemination of entrepreneurial attitudes among youth.<sup>40</sup> In the end, as these indicators reveal, these must be young people themselves to handle the situation, as the EU can only provide them with some frameworks – policy tools, programmes, certificates, and recommendations on the most profitable vocational choices in Europe.

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<sup>39</sup> See: <http://euskillspacepanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/default.aspx>

<sup>40</sup> Commission Staff Working Document, On EU indicators in the field of youth, SEC(2011) 401 final, Brussels 2011, p. 4.



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## Streszczenie

### **EDUKACJA POZAFORMALNA I NABYWANIE UMIEJĘTNOŚCI – W JAKI SPOSÓB UNIA EUROPEJSKA WSPIERA ZATRUDNIENIE MŁODZIEŻY?**

*W ostatnich latach problem bezrobocia wśród młodzieży w Unii Europejskiej został zidentyfikowany jako palący, zważywszy na to, iż grupa ta została szczególnie dotknięta przez kryzys gospodarczy. W odpowiedzi na kryzys instytucje UE zaprojektowały złożoną siatkę politycznych instrumentów, agencji, programów i inicjatyw, które służyć mają ustanowieniu systemowego podejścia do polityki w zakresie kształcenia i młodzieży w Europie. W 2014 polityka młodzieżowa UE jako jedna z dziedzin interwencji politycznej została podporządkowana nowemu paradygmatowi „gospodarki walczącej z kryzysem”. Także*

w odniesieniu do edukacji pozaformalnej i nieformalnej oraz pracy z młodzieżą, która prowadzona jest głównie poza systemem edukacji szkolnej, polityka UE znacznie zmieniła cele strategiczne, odchodząc od „rozwoju osobistego i kulturalnego oraz wzmocnienia poczucia aktywnego obywatelstwa wśród młodych ludzi” (Program „Młodzież w działaniu” 2006-2013), na rzecz „nabycia umiejętności zawodowych, stworzenia systemów walidacji uczenia się pozaformalnego i większej komplementarności wobec formalnego kształcenia i szkolenia” (Program „Erasmus + Młodzież” 2014-2020). Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza porównawcza społeczno-ekonomicznego kontekstu, który określa, w jaki sposób UE projektuje swoje polityki służące redukcji zjawiska bezrobocia wśród młodych ludzi, oraz jak podejście to zmieniło się w świetle instrumentów finansowych w nowym okresie programowania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bezrobocie wśród młodzieży, polityka na rzecz zatrudnienia, instrumenty polityczne Unii Europejskiej, umiejętności zawodowe, umiejętności podstawowe, edukacja pozaformalna, praca z młodzieżą, edukacja i szkolenia