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Strategic Transitions for Youth Labour in Europe

Jacqueline O'Reilly, Mark Smith,
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Introduction

Youth transitions to employment and economic independence have become increasingly protracted and precarious. Following the Great Recession of 2008 youth unemployment rates soared, although the effects varied significantly across Europe. In countries hit hardest by the recession, young people have faced some of the largest obstacles in finding stable employment, or any kind of employment. But even in countries with a better performance record of getting young people into work, there were still significant pockets of youth, categorised as not in employment, education or training (NEETs), who struggled to make successful and sustainable transitions into employment. This was not altogether a new feature of European labour markets, but the Great Recession exacerbated problems, and in some case reversed previous successes.

Five distinctive characteristics of the recent period of youth unemployment

There are some distinctive characteristics of the current phase of youth unemployment relating to the consequences of increased labour market flexibility, skills mismatch, new patterns of migration and family legacies, as well as an increasing role for EU policy (O'Reilly et al. 2015).

First, the expansion of labour market flexibility through the liberalisation of temporary work, new forms of zero hour contracts and self-employment have made it increasingly difficult for young people to secure a stable foothold in good quality employment.

Second, the reduction in early school leaving and the expansion of higher education have made European youth more qualified than they were in previous decades. However, debates about skills and qualification mismatches illustrate how the expansion of education has been poorly aligned to the changing structure of skills required by employers.

Third, young people are more mobile and more likely to migrate to find work within the EU than in previous recessions. While this may result in reducing unemployment rates in their home countries, there are concerns about the effects of 'brain drain' on the domestic labour market. Further, relatively little attention has been given to what

happens to those who return home: do they experience a bonus from having worked abroad, or is it more difficult for them to reintegrate?

Fourth, our research indicates the importance of taking account of the influence of families on contemporary youth transitions. The legacy of parental work histories, their social background and resources impact on the type of transitions their children make. Evidence suggests that these legacies are associated with new forms of polarisation for younger generations.

And, fifth, policy-making has seen a growing influence from EU institutions expanding their role in promoting and investing in policies to support national and regional initiatives, and in encouraging a greater degree of learning and policy transfer to address these problems.

The STYLE project

Against this background the EU funded STYLE project set out to examine how strategic transitions for youth labour in Europe have been taking shape in the shadow of the Great Recession. The STYLE project examined the obstacles and opportunities affecting youth employment in Europe.

This involved 25 research partners, an international advisory network and local advisory boards of employers, unions, policy-makers and Non-Governmental Organisations from 19 European countries. The aim of the project was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes of very high unemployment among young people and to assess the effectiveness of labour market policies designed to mitigate this phenomenon. The contributions to this volume are intended to provide an accessible summary covering the breadth of research conducted in the project.

The structure of the book

The book includes over 90 authors and more than 60 individual contributions. These contributions are a mixture of summaries from the research working papers, along with individual contributions from a number of young stakeholders who have been involved in different ways with the project. The chapters here have been organised into eight key sections.

Young people's attitudes and values

The first part of the book is a deliberately eclectic range of contributions reflecting a spectrum of voices included in the project at different stages. This has sixteen contributions from young authors, DJs, community activists, journalists, and charity and social enterprise workers, alongside academic researchers.

Policy debates are often discussed as something that happens to 'others', while the voice of those 'others' is rarely heard. This section of the book seeks to redress this imbalance. These contributions focus on how young people's attitudes and values are expressed and interpreted.

The key messages coming out of these contributions illustrate that regardless of different backgrounds and age, young people still value the importance of work as part of their life. However, finding jobs that are rewarding and satisfying is not always easy, especially for those who are less advantaged or are living in countries where youth unemployment is very high. Even under these challenging conditions, with appropriate support they have a valuable contribution to make. Hart et al. (2017) argue that: *'Policy-makers and practitioners should take note that tackling youth unemployment from a resilience-based approach, which takes into consideration all aspects of the young person's life, can increase the likelihood of change. Such an approach also emphasises the importance of working at an individual and social level to tackle youth unemployment.'*

Which countries perform best and why?

Greater attention is given to the wider social level when comparing differences in country performance in the second part of this book. Why do countries have such different levels of performance and what helps reduce youth unemployment?

Contributors show how using different measures of youth unemployment rates, ratios or NEET rates highlight specific policy problems requiring different policy instruments (O'Reilly et al. 2015; O'Reilly et al. *forthcoming*). There have been significant achievements in preventing early school dropouts and increasing the number of young people in higher education, but country differences persist (Hadjivassiliou 2017).

Countries with lower rates of youth unemployment have more stable and well-integrated vocational education and apprenticeships supporting smoother School-to-Work (STW) transitions. Policy-makers have sought to improve these opportunities across Europe as an attractive alternative to general upper-secondary and tertiary education. But they often face the problem that they are seen as of lower status, or employers have limited interest in providing these in significant numbers (Grotti et al. *forthcoming*).

All EU countries have sought to reform their vocational and higher education systems. In many cases this has also been stimulated by EU policies like the Youth Guarantee (Hadjivassiliou et al. *forthcoming*). However, the success of these reforms is still largely influenced by institutional patterns of governance, a topic that is taken up in the third section of the book.

What can we learn about policy innovation?

The contributors to this section point to the relative lack of research on the barriers and triggers for policy learning and transfer to address the problems young people face. These obstacles and facilitators exist at the local, regional, national and supranational level. Understanding how governance mechanisms affect knowledge, learning and transfer is essential to making a significant change to traditional practices, especially where they have not been successful. It also allows us to identify how local and regional networks of policy actors, are, 'despite all odds', developing innovative programmes.

The researchers find that there is a lot of exchange of information between policy-makers at different levels, with identifiable ‘policy entrepreneurs’ promoting learning and transfer. They distinguish between countries that facilitate innovation and a diffusion of ideas at different levels, especially at the local and regional level, and those exhibiting considerable inertia (Petmesidou, González Menéndez and Hadjivassiliou 2017). These authors argue that *‘EU level strategies, such as the Youth Guarantee and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, recently opened up windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs.’*

The Dutch case presents various examples of innovation where a ‘multiple helix’ governance structure in different regions addresses issues of skills bottlenecks in regional labour markets. Van der Meer et al. (2017) argue that this *‘innovative approach represents a shift from the classical modality of governance—which is project-oriented, subsidy-based, and coupled to financial incentives—to a network-based collaborative and more proactive and preventive approach that is conducive to innovative practices.’*

However, the low level of business sector engagement and the structure of micro-firms for example in Spain or Greece mean that some organisations have less capacity to access financial support for training and see this as too costly an activity (Petmesidou and González Menéndez 2016).

The polarisation of the employment structure with a decline of ‘middle-rung jobs’ and a splintering of pathways between those in professional, technical and managerial jobs alongside those in more elementary jobs such as construction, market sales and tourism, have left a significant gap in the labour market (Grotti et al. *forthcoming*). This is a trend observed across a number of highly developed economies. However, it is a trend exacerbated by the consequences of the recent economic crisis and has helped drive investment in higher education, a topic that is taken up in the fourth section of the book.

Skills and education mismatch

Educational reforms aimed at addressing low levels of educational attainment in the past have seen an increase in student participation rates. However, these changes can also create new sets of problems in terms of how educational and structural reforms are synchronised to absorb this better educated labour force. McGuinness et al. (*forthcoming*) argue that overeducation can be a result of an over supply of graduates relative to the capacity of the economy to absorb them; it can be an imbalance in educational attainment and the skills required by employers; or it can be due to asymmetric information or variations in individual preferences. This requires greater attention being given to understanding how an increase in the supply of qualified labour can be absorbed by future employer demand.

The contributions in this section underline how educational attainment remains key to determining many life chances. Educational choices are central to the nature, duration and quality of the school-to-work transitions. The authors concentrate on

higher educational attainment, which is a key factor in increasing the likelihood of moving from unemployment into employment but also carries the risk of mismatch between qualifications and skills required in the job.

Across many EU states the expansion of higher or third-level education creates the potential risk of mismatch and over-education. Indeed over-education rates appear to be converging upwards overtime, although there is no overall increase and country differences persist (McGuinness et al. *forthcoming*). Trends in over-education have followed a cyclical pattern during the great recession reflecting the decline in available job opportunities in a downturn.

One of the unintended consequences of the increase in higher education participation has been an increase in working students. To work while studying may be a necessity for students from more modest backgrounds. But it also provides employers with a higher educated workforce. However, concerns that such working students may crowd out less-educated workers seeking regular work seem to be unfounded. Overall, Beblavý et al. (2017) find that working during their studies can be beneficial in providing young people with some initial exposure and work experience. While McGuinness et al. (*forthcoming*) find that the intervention of private employment agencies can increase risks of mismatch.

The research suggests that mismatch can be avoided where students have higher vocational components to their programmes, more project-based work and placements. However, national specificities in patterns of mismatch and over-education mean that policy makers should pay attention to one-size-fits-all policy measures. A key policy recommendation from the research findings discussed here point to the need for policies that promote greater links between employers and educational institutions as well as investment in career support services in universities and similar institutions (McGuinness et al. *forthcoming*).

Migration and mobility

Labour mobility has been a central tenet of the European project, and the recent period of youth unemployment has seen increased levels of youth migration. For young people these opportunities for mobility expand horizons for both education and employment. The contributions to this section of the book underline how expansion of the Union towards the east and the impact of the Great Recession shaped both the flows and available opportunities for young people.

While much is written about the migration into the EU, intra-EU mobility represents a non-negligible trend and one which shifts over time as old destinations, for example France as a traditional destination for young Spaniards have been complemented by young people moving to the UK, Germany and Ireland (Akgüç and Beblavý 2017).

Young migrants are characterised by being overqualified as they face challenges in terms of integration and recognition of their qualifications. However they are also a

heterogeneous group as the “four stories” presented by Hyggen et al. illustrate. The research presented here tends to show that intra-EU youth migrants from northern and Western EU states are better integrated than those from the south and east (Leschke et al. 2017). The mixed experiences of migrants are also underlined by the interaction of migrant status and gender, reinforcing disadvantages that some young women face.

The policy conclusions of the contributions in this section point to the need for wider implementation of measures and tools to help avoid discrimination and promote integration (Mýtna Kureková and Ortlieb 2017). This includes greater use of gender mainstreaming and qualification recognition across borders and a role of labour market intermediaries in facilitating pan-European migration of young people.

Family matters

Family legacies remain a strong predictor of success on the labour market, the type of educational opportunities available and the probabilities of avoiding the worst of the consequences of the Great Recession. Family resources can provide protection for young people and also create divisions and polarisation between households and amongst different groups of young people.

Family support takes the form of advice, guidance and aspiration-building as well as resources to support risky transitions. The research here finds that working and worklessness are transmitted between generations. Young people growing up in working households fair better than those coming from workless households in avoiding unemployment or inactivity (Berloff et al. 2017a; Zuccotti and O'Reilly *forthcoming*). Further, working brothers and sisters also help expand networks of working peers and opportunities for work (Filandri et al. *forthcoming*). In line with other contributions to this volume, the research presented in this section underlines the importance of gender differences, and how working mothers transmit important values in terms of attachment to the labour market especially for their daughters (Smith and Shanahan 2017a).

Yet social divisions and inter-family differences reinforce divisions for the next generation (Mariani and Gábos 2017; Filandri and Nazio 2017; Filandri et al. *forthcoming*). This intergenerational transmission of inequality has been the subject of previous research and while the contributions here underline these inequalities (for example in relation to access to higher education) they also point to the supportive role that families play in terms of coping with the impact of the Great Recession. For example, families provide a home in which to delay the transition to an independent household, or even to return to in times of crisis (Gökşen et al. 2017).

The long-term implications of these family legacies mean that policies are required to avoid the transmission of disadvantages between generations while permitting the on-going transmission of support and work-orientated values. Such policies need, therefore, to concentrate on those households without the resources to provide the

support in terms of values, aspirations, advice and security for insecure transitions. The benefits of more gender-equal opportunities on the labour market also offer the possibility of addressing inter-family inequalities (Nazio and Gábos 2017).

Flexible working and precariousness

Young people are particularly at risk of the negative consequences of flexible working and precariousness on the labour market. As new entrants to the labour market, young people are frequently in a position of “outsiders”. With limited employment histories they may be excluded from certain forms of income security measures for those without work. As a result young people are often caught in the tension between measures to promote flexibility and security, as they experience increasing insecurity on the labour market. Also, recent measures to increase flexibility have had a disproportionate impact upon the young.

The shifting patterns of participation on the labour market and the plethora of new forms of employment contracts in the shape of zero hour contracts or bogus self-employment mean that traditional dichotomous measures of being in work or without work are being questioned (Eamets et al. 2017). The conditions associated with youth self-employment, in terms of lower income and longer working hours, tend to be inferior to those in dependent employment, and for the young entrepreneurs, or those in ambiguous ‘self-employment’ contracts these are major challenges to the regulation of work and benefits.

Indeed the rise of precarious transitions calls for new measures that take into account young people’s trajectories over time. It is not just the entry into work that is important but the need to capture the precariousness of this work that may extend into early careers, up to five years or more after leaving education (Berloffia et al. 2017b). Further, our analysis goes beyond the legal regulation of precarious employment to take account of experiences of subjective insecurity and its negative consequences on young people’s wellbeing.

Both old and new measures of precariousness underline how gender gaps open up early in working careers and that young women and different ethnic groups are often at a disadvantage; although the nature of this disadvantage varies both by gender and ethnicity (Zuccotti and O’Reilly *forthcoming*). Gender gaps in unemployment rates appear to be closing, but this is largely due to young men experiencing higher rates of unemployment; young women are more prone to being NEETs and are more likely to be at a disadvantage in achieving employment-secure and income-secure trajectories during the school-to-work transition (Berloffia et al. 2017b).

The analysis of policies over the period before, during and after the Great Recession underlines how the plight of young people was largely ignored until the full force of the crisis had materialised into high youth unemployment rates (Smith and Villa 2017). Overall, policies have tended to follow trends of wider priorities rather than being well adapted to the needs of young people. It is therefore important to have a considered

reflection on how new policies that promote self-employment (Ortlieb et al. 2017), or how Active Labour Market Policies (Hansen and Leschke 2017) and those that propose a universal basic income (Smith and Shanahan 2017b) will affect youth trajectories in the future in relation to the qualifications young people are obtaining and the types of employment they can secure.

Inspirational music and film

Finally, the last section of the book closes with a small selection of some inspirational music and films that capture youth transitions to employment and adulthood. These are tunes we have listened to, or referred to, as we have been conducting the research for this book. Some of these hark back to the 1980s and earlier, when some of us were in our youth; some of these are much more recent reflecting the perennial problems facing young people in their transitions to adulthood. Some of these songs and films deal with very serious issues related to youth homelessness, crime, early pregnancy, prejudice and failed aspirations, alongside more light-hearted comic reflections on the challenges young people face and how they overcome them.

The final word

The idea to present our research here in this format was inspired by the Compas Anthology on Migration (<http://compasanthology.co.uk>). We hope, like the authors of that anthology, that this format will allow our work to reach a broader audience of readers who may come to it for different reasons and go away with some unexpected discoveries. For those interested in following up in more detail, many of the summary findings presented here can be read in full as working papers available on the project website (www.style-research.eu/publications/working-papers) and as chapters in the forthcoming book *Youth Labor in Transition* (Oxford University Press: New York).

Finally, through these multi-media platforms we will have met the European Commission's expected impact from the project: first, to advance the knowledge base that underpins the formulation and implementation of relevant policies in Europe with the aim of enhancing the employment of young people and their transition to economic and social independence. And, second, of equal importance, to have engaged with relevant communities, stakeholders and practitioners in the research with a view to supporting employment policies in Europe that impact upon the lives of young Europeans.

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