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**Employability pathways for young adults:
lived experiences of learners and practitioners in Youth Guarantee programmes**

ABSTRACT

Until today, thousands of young adults still dropout of school with no or low qualifications and experience difficulties in entering the labour market. The European Commission offers funding and opportunities for young adults to enter employability enhancing training, often organised under its flagship initiative 'The Youth Guarantee'. The aim of these programmes is to make young adults a work, training or educational offer within four months of their start into this initiative.

In this paper, we critically explore the concept of employability and focus on the roles of both the young adults undergoing training interventions, but also of practitioners whose work is ideally embedded within the local context of the labour market and the economy. We were interested in the participation experiences by both groups to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of these programmes. Evidence from interviews demonstrated that learners and practitioners were generally satisfied with the interventions, although individualised support was preferred over group based activities. Working with stakeholders was strongly recommended for this target group who tends to experience cumulative disadvantages. Long-term follow-up of participants' destinations will provide better evidence on the effectiveness of these programmes.

INTRODUCTION

It is Europe's goal to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (Author, 2016). Providing high quality education and training to its citizens is perceived by the Commission as a powerful strategy to achieve this aim (European Commission, 2009). Nevertheless, participation in education and training among adults remains low in a wide range of countries, especially the Southern European countries and a range of Eastern European ones (Desjardins, 2017). A significant proportion of young adults keeps on dropping out from initial education without obtaining final school qualifications (Eurostat, 2018). These young adults run the risk to end up in unemployment or their labour market activeness might be characterised by precarious situations. While the extent to which young adults are not in employment, education or training (NEETs) varies across countries, each region in Europe has to deal with this problem to a certain extent.

Even in countries with a low youth unemployment rate, individual headcounts of these people would still result in thousands of young adults being out of the labour market. For example, in 2018, in the European Union, on average 10.6 percent of young adults between 18 and 24 years old did not obtain a final qualification of secondary school (Eurostat, 2018).

This paper provides insights on the experiences of young low-qualified adults and service providers working with them in order to help them transitioning into the labour market. Our research has been international in nature and draws on empirical research concurrently undertaken in nine European countries. These countries have the following proportions of school 18 to 24 year old adult: Spain (17.9 percent), Italy (14.5 percent), Bulgaria (12.7 percent), Estonia (11.3 percent), the UK (10.7 percent), Slovakia (8.6 percent), Belgium (8.6 percent), Austria (7.3 percent) (Eurostat, 2018).

We adopted a multilevel approach in that we were interested in exploring the situation of young adults not only from a micro-level perspective, but in combination with insights from practitioners. This is done through the exploration of young adults' participation in European funded Youth Guarantee programmes, a scheme further explained below. The often supply-sided focus of research on youth unemployment has urged us to widen our scope, underpinned by employability theories, including the employability perspectives typology designed by McQuaid and Lindsey (2005). Our paper will start by refining our focus on employability and briefly explain the determinants of participation in post-compulsory education and training. Afterwards, we will explain details on our methodological approach, discuss the major results coming out of our empirical work and finalise our paper by considering a range of recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

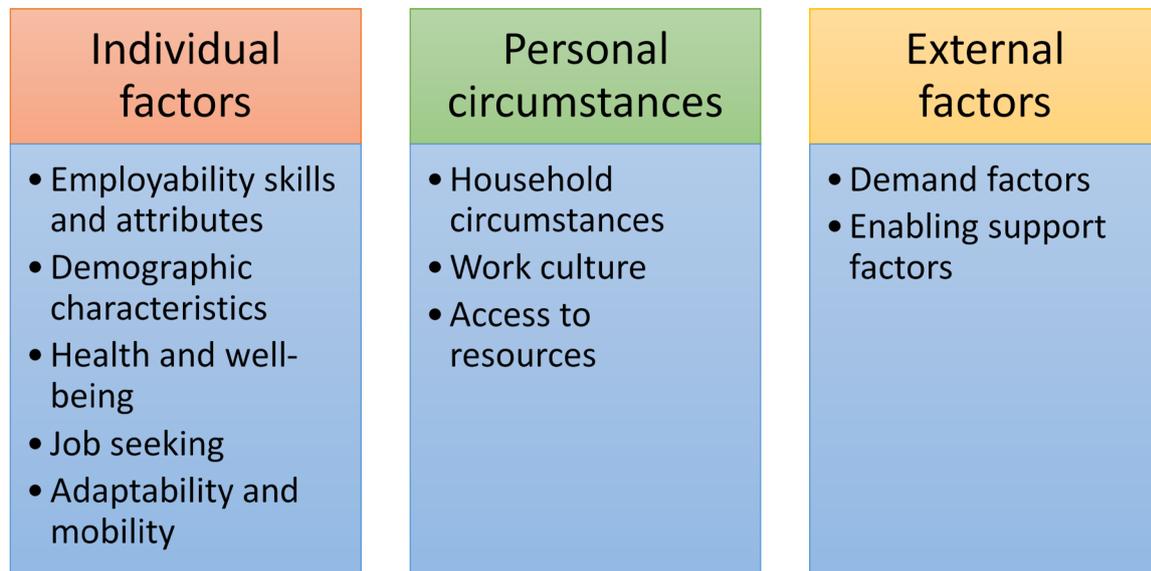
EMPLOYABILITY AND PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING

McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) have widely criticised the one-sided focus of the concept of employability. Traditionally, people are deemed to be employable when they have gained the ability to be in employment and to hold on to this situation (Gazier, 1998). This narrow view does not take into the consideration the status of the labour market. For example, understanding youth unemployment in the Southern European countries involves a deeper understanding of macro-level structural failings, including the inability of the labour market to generate jobs for new entrants, avoiding a 'blame the victim' discourse (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Evans et al., 1999). Throughout the history of employability research, concepts like 'flow employability' and 'interactive employability' have emerged, referring respectively to the probability of job-seekers to find a job in the current labour market and the cooperation needed between individuals and employing institutions, organisations and the labour market governed by policy-makers to open up jobs and actively attract people to them. In working out these interactions, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) summarised the

different factors relevant to the concept of employability from different angles. This is being presented in Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 here]

Figure 1 Employability perspectives (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005)



Individual factors characterising employability have been defined by five types of attributes. Firstly, ‘employability skills and attributes’ refer, according to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) to characteristics like basic skills, motivation and confidence, basic skills like literacy and numeracy, problem-solving and time-management skills, team working skills, formal qualifications, work experience and labour market history. This has been a core focus of work by leading international organisations like the OECD (see OECD, 2016). Secondly, ‘demographic characteristics’ can predict employability too, for example, older adults often experience difficulties to find a job because they have become too expensive or their skills have become obsolete. Thirdly, as argued by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005), ‘health and wellbeing’ are important factors too, as long-term illness tends to have a negative effect on someone’s employability level. Fourthly, the factor ‘job seeking skills’ has been included in the framework too. Knowing how to use job search engines and the ability to craft a high quality CV can help adults in finding a job (see Scott et al., 2017). Lastly, ‘adaptability and mobility’ can enhance employability too. The willingness to move to an area with higher levels of job opportunities and the openness to accept types of work in different context might help the chances of finding new employment, as recognised in a more recent study by Gaia Santos (2019). However, these individual factors of employability need to be interpreted against the background of adults’ personal circumstances. These factors resemble the concept of barriers preventing participation as discussed by Cross (1981). Adults with care duties, either for children or parents, are exposed to situational barriers which might result in a reduced number of hours available for the labour market, or limited mobility to move to another city or town (EIGE, 2019). Furthermore, families might put pressure on new mothers to stay home to engage in childcare duties to work part-time, or to encourage fathers to search for a high paid job to maintain their family (Dieckhoff & Steiber, 2011). The environment of adults can thus play an important role in setting a dominant work culture according to which people are supposed to behave. Additionally, adults differ in their access to resources. For example, people with high levels of social capital might be introduced to new jobs by their extensive network (see

Batistic & Tymon, 2017), but also access to public transport or childcare arrangements might influence their opportunities for work.

Apart from individual factors and personal circumstances, it is important to highlight that employability needs to be understood from multiple angles. As such, McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) included external factors in their theoretical framework. Demand factors refer to the structuring of the labour market at the national and regional context and whether there is a high demand for jobs. This can be influenced by the status of the economy and whether the country or region is attractive enough for investors who generate jobs. Childcare might be freely available to adults in some countries while in other countries, it might be very expensive and lead to the decision to not be active on the labour market. Dependent on the macro-level characteristics of countries and regions, there might be differences in how far jobs are being well-protected or whether many need to go through casualised contracts, discourses typically underpinned by reflections on welfare typologies and work by Esping-Andersen (1989). Recruitment practices might differ too, for example when countries have weak regulations in place to protect practices like discrimination or to validate foreign qualifications. The lack of flexibility in the labour market can then have a negative impact on a person's level of employability. At the same time, countries and regions deal differently with helping young adults to overcome their personal barriers in their search for employment. Walther (2006) provided a detailed account on the different regimes of youth transitions and how countries conceptualise 'youth' differently in relation to employability. For example, the UK sees employability as a pathway to early economic independence while Nordic countries prefer a focus on personal development and increased levels of active citizenship.

Young adults' employability can thus be low because of a number of factors, but so can be their chances to participate in education and training activities that might help them increasing their employability skills. It is generally known that those with the lowest qualifications and those furthest away from the labour market do not often participate in post-compulsory education and training (author, 2016; Desjardins, 2017). There are several reasons for this. At the personal level, they have often experienced failure at school and dropped out before obtaining their final qualification of secondary school. This might have undermined their confidence and motivation (author, 2016). They have higher chances to be out of the labour market or to be employed in elementary jobs. As such, their employers are unlikely to further invest in their skills. Their barriers can thus be situational and dispositional, but also institutional in that they might lack the resources to invest in their own education because of enrolment fees they might have to pay by themselves. It is also commonly known that patterns of participation in post-compulsory education and training significantly differ between countries (Desjardins, 2017). Nordic countries with strong social-democratic values and high levels of state support in relation to social policies tend to demonstrate the highest participation rates (Author, 2016). This is in contrast with South European Mediterranean systems where participation tends to be low, and where social support tends to be organised at the levels of families.

Combining insights from the literature on employability with participation in post-compulsory education and training leads to an interesting but problematic situation. Those young adults who are furthest away from the labour market and who are least qualified to enter high level jobs do not tend to participate in post-compulsory education and training. It is this paradox that our research project was interested in. We explored the participation experiences of young low qualified adults in employability schemes, but extended the focus of our research to include factors at the level of the education and training institutions and at the level of local policy-making. Furthermore, we

conducted research simultaneously in nine different European countries representing different types of welfare states. We wanted to hear from all these actors what pedagogical practices are being used with young low-qualified adults in employability courses, what cumulative disadvantages they have to deal with and how this makes it challenging for them to participate in post-compulsory education and training. We wanted to learn from their experiences so that training institutions and the policy environment can better help them to excel in their programmes. Before providing insights on these issues, we provide more contextual information about the countries in which we have conducted our research. Afterwards, we discuss the context of the European Youth Guarantee and we go deeper into the methodological approaches of our project.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Nine European countries

Data presented in this paper were collected in a 2.5 million Euro's Horizon 2020 project. The consortium consisted of nine European countries and a self-funded partner in Australia. Partners were selected according to their background knowledge and skills in relation to education and training, bringing together a group of experts from different types of European welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1989; Hall & Soskice, 2001; Roosmaa & Saar, 2017). England and Scotland represent the Liberal Market Economy in which there tends to be minimal income protection and uneven access to adult education, mostly privately supported through workplace training. Austria, Flanders, Italy and Spain represent the Coordinated Market Economy (Hall & Soskice, 2001). In these countries, there is a stronger focus on industry and company specific competencies. They tend to have stronger trade unions than in Liberal Market Economies. In Austria and Flanders, education and training tends to be stratified but with a stronger focus on vocational skills (see Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013). In Italy and Spain, Active Labour Market Policies tend to be weaker and participation in education and training of adults remains low. Estonia, Slovakia and Bulgaria represent the Dependent Market Economy (see Roosmaa & Saar, 2017). Economic and corporate governance in these countries is dependent on the dominance of transnational enterprises and trade unions tend to be weak. All three countries suffer from minimal income protection and less developed Active Labour Market Policies. Participation rates in post-compulsory education and training in Estonia are higher than in Slovakia and Bulgaria. Especially in the latter country, adults – including young adults - do not succeed in engaging in education and wide inequalities in enrolment between different social groups exists. In accordance to work by Walther (2006), these countries do not only differ in relation to the construction of their education and training systems, but also in their approaches to stimulate youth employability among young adults.

Despite the differences between these countries, they are all geographically located in Europe and are – at the time of carrying out our research – members of the European Union. As such, they committed themselves in 2009 to a set of benchmarks and indicators in the field of education and training (European Commission, 2009). This includes an increased participation of adults in education and training and a decreased school drop-out rate of young adults. Despite the strong role of a governance by numbers approach by the European Commission in which countries are put under peer pressure to demonstrate annual progress towards common standards (see Grek, 2009), nearly all countries in Europe are still facing problems. Thousands of young adults – 10 percent of the EU population between the ages of 18 and 24 – leave school without a final qualification of upper secondary education, which puts them in a vulnerable position to make a successful transition into the labour market. As explained above, this situation might be made worse by poor demand for skills in the labour market, an important aspect of employability, as explained by McQuaid & Lindsay

(2005). A specific European scheme that aims to help young adults in this regard is the European Youth Guarantee (Milana & Klatt, forthcoming).

The European Youth Guarantee

Young adults have experienced significant difficulties in entering the labour market, especially in the aftermath of the Great Recession in the late 2000s (Malo & Moreno Mínguez, 2018). Inspired by good practices available in the Nordic countries, a European Youth Guarantee scheme launched in 2013 (Escudero & Lopez Mourelo, 2017; Piqué et al, 2016; Carreras et al, 2018). The core aim of the Youth Guarantee is to offer young adults' employment, education or training within four months of leaving school or becoming unemployed (European Commission, 2013, Milana & Klatt, forthcoming). While initially focussing on young adults up to the ages of 25, several countries have widened the scheme to those under the ages of 30. As an Active Labour Market Policy measure, the scheme combines a range of offers of support, including job-seeking assistance, tailored training increasing young adults' employability in accordance to the needs of the labour market and job placements. Most interventions are carried out in cooperation with a range of relevant stakeholders in the social sector. Countries participating in the Youth Guarantee scheme can ask for financial support from the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative. In many countries, support under the Youth Guarantee needs to take place in areas of high youth unemployment. Since the implementation of the scheme, youth unemployment in Europe has decreased (Milana & Klatt, forthcoming). It is however unclear whether this has been a direct result of the Youth Guarantee or whether the demand for skills in the youth labour market has picked up in the recent five years.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The policy trail method

The need to increase our understanding on how society can help young adults to enhance their employability is a core aim of this paper. At the core of the focus of this paper are the young adults themselves and the practitioners who work with them as part of an education and training intervention. In working towards this aim, it has been important to move away from the strong supply-side focus of skills. As such, we decided to design 'policy trails', exploring how wider policy approaches travel through the local contexts in which these young adults are embedded, and how these interact with the daily functioning of the education and training institutions carrying out interventions as part of the Youth Guarantee scheme. The policy trail method was designed as part of the European Seventh Framework project LLLight in Europe and has been defined as follows:

(t)he methodology of studying a policy trail...entails adopting a position of seeking to map 'the terrain the policy travels through rather than the policy itself, analysing how the policy is shaped through its journey' (Holford and McKenzie, 2013: 1). Part of this process is to interrogate the diversity and conflicts which permeate the policy process – how it is shaped, negotiated and contested...this means investigating and analysing the effects of policy when it connects locations and people at different levels.

Policy trails provide opportunities to explore governance from the point of view of the different actors involved in implementing a specific policy, in our case an Active Labour Market Policy with young adults in Europe (Cort, 2014; Melo & Holford., 2015). As outlined above, our research study intended to be follow a multilevel approach, incorporating insights from individuals, education and training practitioners and policy-makers.

Sampling of programmes and respondents

Sampling of respondents was done at programme level. Each team within our consortium was asked to select one programme within the European Youth Guarantee, or if lacking, a programme that represents the scheme's aims. Interviews had to be undertaken at different levels: with two or three practitioners managing the education and training institution and with those working directly with the young adults, with one or two local policy makers who are familiar with the social and economic situation of the region in which the education initiative takes place, and with a minimum of five young adults participating in the initiative. Once a specific programme had been identified, the selection of staff members, young adults and local policy makers was undertaken in a purposive way in order to serve the aims of this qualitative study.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. One partner country within the overall project was responsible for the coordination of this specific work package in relation to young adults participating in education and training schemes. Semi-structured interview lists for interviewing local policy makers, practitioners and young adults were provided in a common template and designed by the consortium. Partners were free to ask follow-up questions picking up on relevant answers provided by the interviewees in order to maximise the potential of young adults' construction of their own experiences. Each country applied for ethical approval within their own institution based on the aims and rationale of the project and copies of the semi-structured interview lists and consent forms. Interviews have been carried out in the country language, they were audio-recorded and most of them have been transcribed.

Data analysis procedures

Common templates were provided, helping partners with the structuring of their country reports. Each team had to submit a report in English to the coordinating team in which they provided summaries of the core themes, backed up with quotations from the interviews. The template provided core topics as mentioned during the interviews but partners had to engage themselves into a process of inductive and iterative coding and labelling of the data (Bryman, 2004; Rapley, 2011). The national reports formed the basis of the comparative analyses, looking for keywords and themes appearing in the different reports. Coding and labelling of the country reports has been undertaken by the coordinating research team, including a quality control check through scrutinising and checking the data by a second researcher. This approach was taken to strengthen the validity and reliability of the claims to be made based on the data.

RESULTS

The results section of this paper focuses on the characteristics of the education and training programmes and the experiences of the young adult participants. This is structured in three sections. The first one will focus on the characteristics of the selected programmes and discuss their pedagogical activities. The second one will focus on the young adults' personal life circumstances and the cumulative disadvantages they have to deal with. The third section integrates the interaction between the learners and their environment and focuses on how we can learn from young adults' experiences in designing the best possible ways to help them increase their levels of employability.

Overview of selected programmes and their programme activities

Starting with Scotland and England, representing the Liberal Market Economy, programmes selected for the purpose of this study represented the aims of the European Youth Guarantee, but were not directly part of it. The United Kingdom concluded that their own youth employment schemes were appropriate to meet the needs of young people, although they are eligible to access funds through the Youth Employment Initiative. In Scotland, a college entry level programme in a Business faculty was selected in a major city. Apart from classroom based courses in business related subjects such as accounting and IT, young adult learners took part in modules to increase their general literacy and numeracy skills and had access to courses on employability skills. In England, the study explored a lottery funded initiative focussing on strengthening young adults' employability skills for which it received more than £100 million. The programme started from a strong individually centred approach of mentoring the young people, typically between the ages of 18 and 24 and for whom it is most challenging to enter the labour market.

The Austrian policy trail was developed in relation to an existing five weeks' outreach campaign carried out in a major city. Events tailored towards young adults tended to have a strong vocational focus. It included taster sessions, career guidance activities, tailored workshops about specific professional skills and information events. Participation was mostly on a drop-in basis, not on a specific commitment for a certain period of time. In Flanders, the selected programme, eligible for Youth Guarantee support, aimed to provide young adults the chance to boost their employability and soft skills through a partnership between schools, sports clubs and a circus school. Examples of skills focussed on during the initiative included communication skills, working in team, taking initiative, perseverance and communication skills.

The two Mediterranean countries in the project, Italy and Spain, selected programmes directly focussing on providing young people with work experience. In Italy, a customised programme for young people within a specific company was selected, combining work-based training with extra classroom activities worth 80 hours. Areas of work included electric and mechanical assembly. In Spain, the programme selected for the purpose of the policy trail focussed on helping young people to enter and maintain employment carried out through work placements. Activities combined occupational with more general training and participants underwent a placement phase of six months in the construction sector.

In the three Eastern European countries, programmes under the Youth Guarantee were selected that aimed to help young people transitioning into the labour market. In Estonia, the focus of the selected programme was on providing work experience and one-to-one support to young adults as well as providing financial support to employers to offer young people a placement with their company. A similar selection was made in Bulgaria where young adults had to enter the programme through the labour office in order to profit from one-to-one support in finding a job or work placement for which employers could receive financial incentives. The programme in Slovakia was similar in scope and focussed on a combination of individualised support and group session focussing on the development of employability skills. Young adults were expected to attend 13 meetings in the time span of two months, of which nine took place in the local labour office and four at their workplace. The focus of these meetings was on discussing their development and goals. Countries selected their programmes taking into account the characteristics of the Youth Guarantee initiative. Based on the description of these programmes, two main approaches to working with young adults could be recognised: an individual versus a group based approach. Most programmes used a combination of both. Individual support was provided in relation to career guidance and counselling, providing information to the young adults in order to help them in making decisions about their future. Many programmes included individual work placements for which mentoring or one-to-one follow up was foreseen. Group activities were also included in the programmes. In exploring the Scottish and Italian examples, a strong classroom based focus became visible. Other

programmes included workshop type interventions too. This related to group activities on basic and social skills, on writing a CV or on specific technical skills needed to carry out a job. While countries differ in relation to their social and economic context, the approaches to working with young adults furthest away from the labour market within education and training initiatives seemed to have many similarities.

In what follows, we shift our focus on who the young adults participating in these initiative are, both from the perspectives of the young people themselves and the practitioners who work with them. We first focus on their mostly problematic educational past and the barriers they had to overcome in order to access an education and training programme.

Young adults' characteristics and their personal circumstances

'Cumulative disadvantages' was a key term that strongly arose from the data analysis based on the country reports. The following descriptions were being used in the country reports, each backed up by a relevant quote made by interviewees: affected by family breakdown and bullying (Scotland: such experiences had disrupted their formal educational experience and meant they had left school with no qualifications), young and jobless (England: Physical and mental health issues are prominent – 27% have a disability), young people encountering situational barriers such as for example childcare (Austria: Individual living conditions prevent people from participating in courses or attending for a longer period of time), not having a qualification of secondary education (Flanders: The young people we see here, it goes from not having a fixed address to problems with children at school, problems with parents, with relationships. It is very diverse but it's just there. You can't ignore it), young people not in education, employment or training (Italy: young people aged between 18 and 29, either NEET or graduated, and Spain: young people who are more unemployed than inactive and who have low level of education), lack of work experience (Estonia: youth aged 16-29, who lack or have little work experience, and who have not been occupied for the last three months, or temporarily occupied), difficult to identify groups (Bulgaria: about whom we have no way of obtaining information, except if we really look for them, like that, in the streets), NEETs with complex problems of cumulated disadvantages (Slovakia: facing elementary problems and barriers at the very start of their adulthood following completion of initial education or, often, after having early dropped out of education before completing elementary education at ISCED level 1).

A textual analytical approach was undertaken based on the sections of the report that described the characteristics and personal life circumstances of the adult learners. A WordArt figure was extracted based on keywords. Unsurprisingly, elements as low-qualified, dropouts, NEETs, young and unemployed popped up quite significantly. Young people were described in the country reports as being in debt, suffering from illness, having a disability, lacking confidence, struggling with anxiety. Tackling addiction, being the victim of bullying and having gone through negative educational experiences in the past were mentioned too. Similar to findings in relation to the description of the programmes, the profiles of young adult learners in the different European countries seem to be rather similar to each other. While proportions of NEETs are clearly higher in some countries than in others, those who are furthest away of the labour market are in need of help regardless of the country in which they live. Further understanding how young adults navigated their ways through the programmes in interaction with practitioners working with them is the focus of our next section.

Participation as an interaction between the adult learner and the environment

Interviews with young adult learners generally indicated they were satisfied with their participation in the education and training intervention. This was found across the different countries and resonated with most of the opinions as expressed by practitioners. They too evaluated the initiatives

as worthwhile. Selected examples of general satisfaction quotes include the following:

Italy: *The level of satisfaction recorded is very high, both in the provider, in the company and among the participants. (country report)*

Estonia: *I am very much satisfied and excited about the future in connection with the programme. (young adult)*

Positive elements were mainly recognised at the level of social and psychological benefits of participations as people received an opportunity to widen their networks and to re-build their often lost confidence. Examples from interviews are provided here.

About making new friends and connections, young people told us the following:

Scotland: *Since I've been on this course my confidence has went up, like I've made friends and that and like, confidence has went up and that; (young adult)*

Estonia: *I have found here somebody with whom talking about worries and problems feels easy and convenient; as a matter of fact, I have no other similar person in my life and naturally, this makes me very happy; (young adult)*

Bulgaria: *You see how one is supposed to work in a team, for instance, of four chambermaids, so that you are not the only one to go to work, for instance. (young adult)*

This situation of making new friends was also recognised by practitioners in several countries.

Flanders: *In a group you meet new people, and kids that really have these game addictions get to know some more friends, and they become a bit more confident. So that is a benefit. (young adult)*

Reducing anxiety and re-building confidence was another theme that strongly appeared throughout the data.

Scotland: *I think it's because I have anxiety, but from coming here, see if you met me, like, a year ago, I'd be a completely different person; (young adult)*

England: *someone being honest with me helped me to trust them. This is the best place for a young person to be; (young adult)*

Slovakia: *This programme makes sense especially if one is longer unemployed and this psychologically activates oneself so that one does not wait and freeze but seeks a job; (young adult)*

Spain: *There has been a complete shift from unemployment (in relation to self-confidence) (young adult)*

While breaking down dispositional barriers seemed important to these young people, they also talked about their increased job chances, their desires to further their education at higher levels and the general sense of feeling they will become more active in different life domains.

Scotland: *I've just got a new job because of this course...it's a very simple just working in catering... it's, I'm hoping that it's going to teach me things like dealing with customers and being more of an outgoing person which is important. I see it as part of going on in the world of work. (young adult)*

Flanders: *First I didn't have a lot of expectations, I thought maybe they would help me to find an internship, but now my expectations are really much higher. So it turned out much better than I expected. (young adult)*

Austria: He had searched for more consultations with one educational counsellor and subsequently plans to re-enter his original occupational field to apply for jobs in line with his technical occupation. In the long run, he is considering entering a higher education programme (country report)

Spain: To me, personally, yes. He helped me because of that, and I'm going to work, you know? (young adult)

Bulgaria: For instance, I am thinking about getting a card for a fitness salon or something like that, my way of life will definitely be more active. (young adult)

Despite the general feel of satisfaction, both young people and practitioners mentioned areas for improvement. One theme that appeared here was the strong need of young people to receive one-to-one support from their mentors and the professionals working with them. They need to gain their trust and feel valued as individuals. However, this was not always feasible because of lack of staff or adequate levels of funding. As such, it became clear that experiences of participants are also shaped in interaction with what the education and training environment can offer them.

Scotland: I mean this is something we'll probably have to look at in the future, the size of this class. I think it's, I personally think it's probably too big. There could be up to 24 in the class. But we've so many students with additional learning needs it's, it's probably, we probably need to rethink about reducing. (practitioner)

Flanders: And after a while they also think like 'you are now the eight person already to want to work on me'. So they also don't immediately open up to us. With many of them you only gradually get a good overview of everything that's going on. (practitioner)

These providers also faced needs to work together with other stakeholders in the area as many young adults experienced cumulative disadvantages. Help was in general needed across a range of life domains such as education, work and health. Often, these interactions with other services were not only valuable during the participation process of the young adults, but were also used as a way to reach out to them.

Austria: The same young people also refused to make use of the Public Employment Services, however, at least some of these hard-to-reach groups showed up in two places. On the one side, they made up for a significant proportion of the cities of Vienna's organisations supporting people suffering from drug (including alcohol) addiction. On the other hand, a number of regionally funded social integration projects had been introduced, which deliberately posed very little demands on its potential clients, for example, allowing for hourly, voluntary participation, rewarded even by a small hand out. (country report)

England: In year 2, we realised we had to think of a way to access local expertise that could then tap into young people living within those areas, micro hubs are working with local organisations who have local knowledge, local capital, who are able to engage successfully with people from the area (practitioner)

Estonia: The workshops and information event are organised in cooperation between the EUIF local offices, school, youth centres. In the recent couple of years, they have become immensely popular among young people and organisations. (practitioner)

The interaction between the learners and the institution and the idea of shared responsibility between them, encouraging young adults' agency was well expressed by one of the practitioners in the Bulgarian interviews.

Bulgaria: you will meet them intensively in order to make them committed and that they learn that the responsibility [for entering the labour market – I. N.] falls not only on the institution but on them personally. (practitioner)

One of the reasons why young adults generally seemed satisfied with their participation might be explained through the voluntary nature of most of these programmes. This then leads to a self selection of young people who are motivated to take part. The Slovakian policy trial demonstrated that non-voluntary participation can have a negative impact on learning experience.

Slovakia: People go there as if they were forced to go. They frankly stated it, it's not just a feeling. You go there and you only watch the clock to see when it is time for you to finish, get up and leave. (practitioner)

In what follows, we will engage in a critical reflection on these results.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research study was to gather detailed insight in the experiences of both young adult learners and practitioners who work together in dedicated employability programmes in line with the goals of the European Youth Guarantee initiative. This is important as too many young adults in Europe do not get the chances to fully participate in society and this leads to growing inequalities across the life span.

Generally speaking, both participants are practitioners interviewed for the purpose of this study expressed positive feelings towards the interventions and this finding seemed rather consistent across the various types of European countries – see above – included in our study. Overall, these findings are promising but need to be carefully explored in relation to its wider context.

As discussed above, whether a (young) adult is employable or not is the result of the interaction between the adults' skills, their personal life circumstances and the conditions of the labour market and economy, as discussed in the theoretical framework on employability constructed by McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005. For example, in countries with lower employment rates, it might be perceived as useful to generate learning and work experience opportunities in cooperation with firms who can receive financial incentives from governments for committing to taking young people on. One of the difficulties with evaluating this scenario is that we do have limited information available on the long-term effects of these interventions. The European Youth Guarantee initiative is mostly been implemented through shorter term funds generated by the European Social Fund (Milana & Klatt, forthcoming). While many young people have profited from this income stream, it is harder to find evidence on long term benefits for young adults as they are not being tracked for a long enough period. Country reports revealed that most programmes have some sort of evaluation mechanism in place, often a satisfaction questionnaire at the end of the intervention. It is thus difficult to generalise the success of the Youth Guarantee scheme. Youth unemployment might have fallen in the last decade but this might in the first place be the result of an increased level of economic productivity after the global financial crisis that hit hard in the late 2000s. Whether certain skills and levels of education and training thus truly increased employability – as advocated by McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) – remains unclear.

The lack of long term monitoring has also affected the development of our Intelligent Decision Support System, a tool we are preparing for policy-makers and practitioners to help them understanding which factors are most likely to predict successful outcomes given a the context in which these young people live and the problems they face. A clear recommendation arising from our research is the need to implement more longitudinal monitoring of the target group. This is supposed to lead to higher quality levels of evidence and will provide a stronger knowledge base for evidence based policy making.

As already mentioned before, the largely positive experiences among our young interviewees might be the result of self-selection. Those furthest away from the labour market tend to the hardest to engage. In a number of interviews with policy-makers and practitioners, for example in England, Scotland, Italy and Estonia, comments were made about the inability to offer places to all young adults in need of support. This might lead to an approach of ‘parking and creaming’, where the adults with the highest levels of success are taken in. They might be a safe bet to increase success rates and – as bluntly expressed in the Estonian country report – might be less hard work for the adult educators. This can also be interpreted against the theoretical framework of McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) who argue that lack of opportunities can have a strong negative impact on employability. Given the reliance on shorter term funding, it is not always possible for education training institutions to meet the needs of adult learners in terms of personalised support. Reserving enough money in relevant budgets to adequately support the target group in a strongly embedded social system is another recommendation we want to make.

Outreach has demonstrated to be vital and this is ideally undertaken together with a wide range of stakeholders at the level of health, education and employment. People facing multiple disadvantages might be unaware of the opportunities for help that are available and are likely to need integrated help that goes beyond a training intervention. Their personal life circumstances – an important aspect of McQuaid and Lindsay’s theoretical framework – might lead to the experience of situational barriers, such as the challenging combination of work and training with childcare duties. Nevertheless, social services also have a responsibility to provide high level information about the opportunities they have on offer and incentives could be given to break down institutional barriers such as lack of transport in rural areas or lack of affordable childcare opportunities. Overall, it has been positive to see that a start in cooperation between different services has been made in many countries. It is our recommendation to further expand this line of thought to come to the best possible understanding of the different facets of people’s cumulative disadvantages. It is also hoped to achieve a less fragmented landscape of service providers who can then use their own budgets in a more efficient and effective way.

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