

Youth Unemployment Task Force

Statements and Comments

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The document on Youth unemployment in The Netherlands prepared by the Dutch Colleagues, Jaap de Koning, Arie Gelderblom and Pater van Nes provide an insight of the problems youths experience in entering the labour market and initiatives governments can take to facilitate this transition, particularly with youths at risk. In quoting existent data and describing actions taken by the Dutch workforce set up, a number of issues relating to youth and unemployment are highlighted. These issues are relevant to the Netherlands, Malta and most probably, to the other member states within the EU. Many of these issues will be touched upon at different points in the document. They can be listed to include:

- The need to develop better and more precise methods of gathering statistics that reflect better the real situation/degree of youth unemployment;
- The recognition by governments of the need to take action before youth unemployment becomes too acute a problem;
- The need to take initiatives with short-, medium- and long- term effect in combating youth unemployment;
- The need to make young people aware of the importance of basic literacy levels and to have certification, and the relation between educational success and employment and career opportunities;
- The importance to emphasise certification with both unemployed youth and those in low level jobs;
- The effectiveness of regional centres for disseminating information with youths, parents and employers;
- The need to identify specific groups that are at greater risk of ending up unemployed so that actions directed to them can be taken;
- The importance to reinforce guidance and counselling provision in schools and with youths, particularly with respect to apprenticeships; and
- The need to find alternative methods of education and training to the traditional schooling system which would allow youths obtain basic qualifications.

1. Policy context, economic circumstances and institutional/legal background in Malta

The statistics provided by the Dutch colleagues show that in the Netherlands, youth unemployment is higher than that for the whole population. This is not a problem only with the Netherlands but also with other EU member states.

1.1. Policy Context

Although statistics for Malta are not provided in the paper, local statistics show that as unemployment in Malta is rising, one finds that youth unemployment is significantly higher than the overall percentage. The National Action Plan for Employment for Malta (2004) shows that 45% of the unemployed are youths and that one in five registered unemployed left school before completing secondary education. It also identifies how this category of youths are likely to have longer spells of unemployment than other youths with better academic qualifications.

Malta is currently adjusting to the changes that membership to the European Union has brought with it. It has also experienced for some time a slow but consistent increase in unemployment, both overall and amongst youths. In addition, it is also experiencing a shift in labour market of opportunities, with the manufacturing sector becoming smaller and service sector increasing steadily. This means that there are fewer low skilled jobs but more openings that require specific training. The employment and Training Corporation has recognised this problem for some years now and had commissioned a research report focusing on how youths experience the school to work transition (Gatt, 2004). It has also taken actions directed specifically at youths. These include initiatives such as Job Search seminars, job clubs, Job Experience scheme (JES) Extended training placement Scheme, motivations seminars, voluntary work Group, Leonardo Da Vinci Programme placements, Information sessions in Secondary schools, and recently also working with school dropouts. The current major policy for Malta has been set out in the National Action Plan for Employment in Malta published in 2004. Although this policy document targets all sectors related to employment, one can find parts and actions that refer specifically to youths. These parts feature mainly within the sections of strategy referring to education and certification, and in the part focusing on developing Human Capital and Lifelong learning. This policy document reflects recent concerns and actions taken in Malta. It states the need to consolidate post-secondary general education which leads to tertiary studies, and to sustain the development of vocational education which had been neglected for a long time and had only received the due attention in 2000 with the setting up of the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology. There is also emphasis on the development of a structure for vocational qualifications in Malta.

1.2. Economic Circumstances

Malta is currently experiencing the economic problem of a high public deficit, and the challenge to control it in its efforts to introduce the euro, now that is bound to the ERM. This is a problem that the government is trying to deal with in working towards the convergence criteria of the EU in 2007. Consequently the budgetary allocation in public spending as well as the further education institutions like the University of Malta and the vocational education

has been kept at a steady level these past few years despite the growing number of students. This has put educational institutions in difficult economic circumstances. This is particularly so with respect to tertiary education with the government currently reviewing the present financing system of University students. In, addition, the Employment and Training Corporation has to deal with retraining the growing number of unemployed persons. The current situation thus brings with it great challenges in the case of youth and helping their transition from school or unemployment into the labour market.

1.3. Institutional/Legal Background

Education in Malta falls under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment. The Education Act (1988) stipulates a compulsory age of 5-16 years and provides the Minister of Education with the power to set the National Minimum Curriculum (1999) which binds all schools (State, Church and Independent) to provide a basic level of education to all students within compulsory age. On completion of compulsory education at the end of secondary school, two main educational paths are possible: general education leading to tertiary education; and vocational education.

The Junior College within the University of Malta together with a few private sixth form colleges provide post-secondary education courses that lead to tertiary studies at the University of Malta, the only state University. The Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST) houses a number of institutes that provide a range of vocational training courses.

The Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), which also falls within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment is concerned with employment as well as training for employability. The ETC has recognised the need to target youth for some time and has commissioned a research project on the School to Work Transition and developed a number of initiatives targeting youths, particularly those looking for work. The fact that the Employment and Training Corporation and the Education sector fall within the same Ministry has helped to bring together these two players, even though there is still a lot of work to be done.

From a legal point of view, education in Malta is regulated by the 1988 Education Act. In the case of employment one finds the Employment Regulations Act and the Industrial Relations Act that regulate the employment conditions and industrial relations. The Employment and Training Act regulates the Employment and Training Corporation.

2. Transferability of Policy

2.1. Holistic Transferability

Considering the possibility of transferability from a holistic perspective, one recognises the benefit of having policies directed specifically at Youth unemployment. The National Action Plan for Employment (2004) for Malta discusses the issues related to youth but these are incorporated within a bigger general framework. Having a focus on youth can provide that

extra impetus to take actions that would help youths with their integration in the labour force and ensuring an acceptable quality of life.

2.2. Specific Actions

2.2.1 Reducing Early School-leaving without Certification

This is a problem that is also experienced in Malta. The research on the School to work transition (Gatt, 2004) identified how half of the student population from particular secondary school type leave school without any certification and consequently with limited prospects for work. There is thus the need to take action to change the present state of affairs. Looking at actions being taken in the Netherlands will thus provide options to actions that can be taken in Malta. One would, however, envisage difficulties from the current educational authorities but then all changes experience opposition.

2.2.2 Reinforcing job mediation

The Employment and Training Corporation has a number of initiatives that focus on helping young persons look for work. These are described in detail in the ETC's Annual report (2004). None the less, it is always a worthwhile exercise to look at what other countries are doing in tackling a similar problem and to share experiences that have been successful. Such exercise would provide mutual benefit to the countries involved in the exercise.

2.2.3 Minimum Wage for Youth Workers

This is an issue that has not really been considered in Malta. It, however, provides a possibility that would be worthwhile looking into as it may be an initiative that would encourage employers to take up youth workers. Although problems with social partners may arise, one should still give it its due consideration.

2.2.4 ESF Programme

Malta has recently approved projects for the 2004-6 period. In identifying areas for further training targeting youths, it is worth looking at programmes being developed by partner countries and to identify examples of effective training schemes that have given positive results and to study the potential of such programmes within a local context.

2.2.5 Increasing the number of apprenticeship training places

This is a problem that the ETC faces with more students registering within the apprenticeship schemes than the number of sponsors available. Studying how the Dutch government is trying to involve public authorities in taking up apprentices within specific projects would definitely be a beneficial exercise as it may provide a solution to a current problem. One, however, needs to have a more detailed look at how this project works such that its potential for transferability can be assessed.

2.2.6 Streamlining and Improving Careers

Like the Netherlands, in Malta there exist a good percentage of youths who finish compulsory education without any certification. The present certification system in Malta caters mainly for the general education track. This limits opportunities for low achieving youths from proceeding to vocational post-secondary courses that tend to require some basic certification. Likewise, problems are experienced with traditional 'school-type' ways of learning that put so

many youngsters off learning. The Employment and Training corporation in fact has embarked on a project that provides an alternative type of education with the goal of reaching school drop outs. However, it would be a good and informative exercise just the same for the ETC and the local educational institution (Education Division) to look at specific initiatives taken in other countries in order to identify alternative models that can be adopted in Malta. Problems in accepting alternative educational models are envisaged as it is difficult to convince local educational authorities of their value and effectiveness. However, if a strong case is made and a model is shown to be successful, there is the possibility for it to be adopted.

2.2.7 The creation of a task force to act as catalyst for the implementation of plans and action points

The government of Malta has stated what it wants to achieve within the perspective of the Lisbon Agenda in its National Action Plan for Employment in Malta (2004). The ETC also has a section that focuses on youths. It would be worth to look at the way the task force in the Netherlands works and to try and study whether such a system would help in bringing about the planned changes in Malta, and whether such a structure would provide the necessary link between policy makers and people in the field such that planned actions are eventually delivered.

As an overall comment for this section, one can say that there is great similarity in the problems relating to youths the Netherlands and those in Malta. This is considered as a good basis for both countries and other EU countries to share their experiences of success such that more effective policies are drawn up and more effective actions that produce results can be taken across the EU.

3. Important Issues

There are no particular issues currently being debated that specifically relate to youths. Following the debate of setting up the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) which now has been in place since 2001, the main concern has been that of raising literacy levels. This problem was highlighted through a small scale study that highlighted the degree of this problem in Malta. Although this problem does not concern solely youths, it has also brought to light the difficulties illiterate youths are experiencing in finding work and their high probability of being unemployed. Recognising this problem, the government has set up the Foundation for Educational Services that works with communities to promote literacy with ages as early as five to adults.

4. Conclusion

Following the peer review exercise in The Hague, it was evident that despite the different cultures, educational systems and actions, more or less all countries experience similar problems. The peer review exercise has shown how beneficial it is for similar players across Europe to meet and share their problems, difficulties and initiatives. It has served to highlight missing aspects within the task force and to help the individual country representatives to reflect on their current state of affairs and to take home ideas about what one can do.

References

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