

Chapter Title: How young people experience and perceive labour market policies in four European countries

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Book Title: Social Exclusion of Youth in Europe

Book Subtitle: The Multifaceted Consequences of Labour Market Insecurity

Book Editor(s): Marge Unt, Michael Gebel, Sonia Bertolini, Vassiliki Deliyanni-Kouimtzi, Dirk Hofäcker

Published by: Bristol University Press, Policy Press. (2021)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1sr6k9z.17>

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How young people experience and perceive labour market policies in four European countries

Roberta Ricucci, Chiara Ghislieri, Veneta Krasteva, Maria Jeliaskova, Marti Taru, and Magdalena Rokicka

Introduction

There is a growing concern about the socio-economic situation of young people, especially in those countries hit by the 2008 financial crisis (Eurofound, 2014; European Commission, 2016). As outlined by several studies, youth are more likely to be excluded from the labour market than prime age workers and to work under less favourable conditions (Banerji et al, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2015, 2017). It is no accident that the young are called the losers in a globalising world (Blossfeld et al, 2005). Therefore, it is important to find out not only what kind of counselling, job guidance, and other forms of support are available to them in various European countries, but also how they evaluate these policy tools. Are these initiatives and services in line with the expectations and needs of young people? How do these policy measures shape labour market prospects and future employment? Such questions are linked to the correspondence between, on one hand, young people's goals, expectations, and anticipated career path, and, on the other hand, the way policies address them.

This chapter is organised as follows: after providing information about the theoretical framework, it describes the main aspects of the national contexts in the chosen countries. It then presents the aims of the analysis. These are used as a basis to formulate the research questions and present the data used. Based on a comparative data analysis, results illustrate how young people use policies and perceive them. The final section discusses these results and summarises the findings while providing some policy suggestions.

Theoretical considerations

Several studies have highlighted the many facets and the complexity of today's youth, in terms of a list of 'lacks' that makes this generation of 'grown-up children' appear choosy and passive compared with previous generations, but they are also portrayed as 'more active, more enterprising, and more inclined to work' (Beaudry et al, 2015: 383). As a whole, the levels of complexity that confront young people in all societal domains seem to require targeted policies and practices such as, for example, guidance and support in planning their lives (Shore and Tosun, 2019). The frequent transitions from one insecure job to another, the discontinuities in educational paths, the enrolment in training courses and, above all, work path constraints need to be taken into account in guidance practice, and career counselling practices should activate and encourage the exploration of possible selves (Oyserman et al, 2006). Indeed, the guidance practices designed to sustain a job search must therefore help young people to reflect on their 'key assets' (Parker, 2007) in order to help them match their motivations and skills with the work activities needed by the contexts in which they live. Lack of job orientation, the need for the right information, quest for counselling, and tutorship in choosing educational, training, and job paths are common issues across countries (CEDEFOP, 2015). In this framework, it seems that European youth need more attention and concrete answers on how to fulfil their job aspirations, and, overall, how they can establish an autonomous life. These needs are part of the relationships between young people and institutions (schools, employment services, career offices, consultant agencies) at the local level, where young people live and try to develop their skills and job opportunities. Indeed, the outcome of the match between youth and their future in the labour market is a matter for local institutions, and these are the actors in charge of implementing national measures in actions and projects (Boeri and Jimeno, 2015). The interweaving derived from different regulatory actions and various authorities in terms of policies for the younger generation is therefore multilayered and complex across countries. Over time, there has been greater centrality on the local level, whose effective autonomy is being challenged by the weakness of the available resources (Ruano and Profiroiu, 2017; Pastore, 2018). In terms of financial resources and as a transversal topic, the progressive reduction in the transfer of resources from the centre to the periphery has highlighted how the decision (and the possibility) to intervene on each level in the approach to policies for young people is tied increasingly to the development of positive

synergies between local authorities and private institutions (sometimes associations and civil society organisations) in each territory. In line with this way of managing the topic, the theoretical framework of this chapter is based on the street-level bureaucracy concept (Lipsky, 2010) that makes it possible to study the mechanisms and channels of formal state support in the form of active and passive labour market policies (ALMPs and PLMPs).

As explained by Lipsky (1980), the concept of street-level bureaucracy is built on two contradictory meanings. On the one side, bureaucracy is a set of procedures and rules imposed by the authorities to guarantee equal access to public services for all citizens who should be treated alike in their entitlement to welfare and benefits. On the other side, the street level conveys direct interactions in which individual needs and characteristics are accounted for, and certain decisions are at the discretion of public servants. As suggested by Lipsky, in street-level bureaucracy, routines and practices are adjusted so that they meet the personal needs and requirement of clients – citizens using public services. Public servants have to obey the rule of law, governmental regulations, and procedures. However, they also have a certain degree of autonomy regarding how they enforce these general rules and policies. Because citizens have direct contact with front-line public servants, the assessment of public servants' performance is associated with the evaluation of government authority and institutions *per se*. Therefore, one could expect that how youth assess particular labour market policies cannot be viewed in isolation from their personal experiences or the experiences of their peers with the staff at employment offices who are responsible for implementing these programmes and providing these services. While aware of this close relationship, this study will try as far as possible to disentangle the assessment of policies from the assessment of their implementation by public servants. Although there are some analyses and meta-analyses on the efficacy of active labour market policies (ALMPs; see Kluge, 2006; Caliendo and Schmidl, 2016) that highlight the relationship between investment and the effects of ALMPs on education and employment, only a few studies have considered the opinions – the voice – of young people with respect to policy (Ariely, 2013; Shore and Tosun, 2019). However, these opinions are important in understanding the causes of the relationship (positive, negative, or zero) between the policies and the developments and conclusions for which they were carried out.

For example, Caliendo and Schmidl (2016) have highlighted the need to evaluate the return on investment relative to the expenditure made by countries on ALMPs. The authors examined the effectiveness

of a range of ALMPs (training courses, job search assistance and monitoring, subsidised employment, and public work programmes) on integration into the first integration in the labour market and further involvement in education, which were the two main objectives of the ALMPs. . Despite only a few partial data, this article highlights that the effectiveness of job search assistance (with and without monitoring) was overwhelmingly positive, whereas the effectiveness of training and wage subsidies was mixed, and of public work programmes was negative. However, Caliendo and Schmidt conclude that evidence on the impact of ALMPs on further education and on the quality of employment is scarce, and that further research is needed. The present study responds to this need, exploring the perceptions and assessments of policies by young Bulgarians, Estonians, Italians, and Poles.

Institutional contexts: different countries, different policies?

Labour market policy in **Poland** was formulated at the beginning of the 1990s. This coincided with a demographic peak and thousands of young people entering the labour market. Since then, different policy measures and instruments have been introduced to alleviate youth unemployment (which reached 42 per cent in 2002 among 15- to 24-year-olds). Together with economic, demographic, and political changes, these measures led to a decline in the unemployment rate, including among young people, to 14 per cent in 2017 (Eurostat Database, 2018).

Labour market policy in Poland is formulated by central government, which delegates its operation to regional and local administrations. Public employment services are decentralised and operate mainly on a regional (*Voivodship*) and a county level (*Powiat*). Powiat labour offices are responsible for registering the unemployed and paying unemployment benefits. There are also other labour market institutions: the Voluntary Labour Corps (OHP –specialised public institution acting on a national and local level), private job agencies, social partners, and local partnerships. EU priorities and incentives are extremely important in providing a framework for ALMP. Two of these are worth mentioning: the Youth Guarantee Scheme (YGS) and the Youth Employment Initiative.

Initiatives and programmes designed for young people in Poland change rapidly, and sometimes they are available only in specific regions. Long-term observations of youth labour market incentives in Poland show that internships are the main type of policy measure – 14.8 per cent of young unemployed (under 25 years) took part in internships in

2015 (Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2015). In addition to internships, other popular measures are training, internship vouchers, training vouchers, and mobility vouchers (Zapala-Wiech, 2018).

In **Estonia**, provision of active labour market initiatives was launched in 1993. Between 1993 and 2009, developing and carrying out ALMP measures was the responsibility of the Estonian Labour Market Board established in 1990. On 1 May 2009, the Labour Market Board was reorganised and became the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund (EUIF). Hardly any youth-specific active labour market measures have been developed since the early 1990s. Before 2009, the number of ALMPs in general was low; there were no specific measures targeting young people. In 2009, a measure called 'Job Club' was introduced; in 2010 it was seen as an action specifically addressing, or at least more suitable for, young people (Siimer and Malk, 2010). The measure stopped running in 2018, after a similar service was offered by different measures. Estonia implemented the YGS initiated by the European Commission in 2015 through eight activities (My First Job; Workshops Directed to Youth; Introducing Labour Market and Working Life; Youth Guarantee Support System; Youth Prop-Up Programme; Youth Summer Work Brigades; Mobile Workshops to Introduce Selected Professions to Young People; Youth Initiatives; and Community Practice). Of the eight, the measure 'My First Job', which is administered by the EUIF, has the largest budget. This is a subsidised job programme that also has a subsidised job training component. Each young unemployed person enrolled in the measure will receive a sum of €2,500 that can be used to finance participation in one or more labour market training courses. Whether or not an unemployed person will actually participate in a course and which depends not only on the needs of the person as identified and agreed by the case manager, but also on the availability of courses. The job training component has been used by a minority of persons enrolled in the measure. The *Tugila* or 'Youth prop-up' programme is another policy initiative related to the YGS. What it does, essentially, is that youth workers using appropriate outreach methods attempt to identify young people who are unemployed and too discouraged to help themselves, or in need of support because of other life circumstances. The function of these youth workers is to encourage the young people, to counsel them, and, when necessary, to put them in touch with a specialist they consider most relevant in the particular case. This could be an EUIF case manager or it could also be a psychologist. This measure was initiated by the Estonian Youth Work Centre.

Italy stands out due to the high rate of unemployment among young people: 31.7 per cent in the 15 to 24 age range versus a European

mean of 15.6 per cent (Eurostat Database, 2018; Istat, 2018). The 2008 crisis produced a need for new rules to regulate the labour market and to reduce the growing unemployment rate, especially among young people.

In 2015, the Jobs Act reform came into force, with the aim – according to the government – of addressing the growing rate of youth unemployment due to the negative effects of the financial crisis and supporting young people's insertion into a more globalised, competitive labour market. Despite these political statements, contractual insecurity did not diminish. On the contrary, the dark side of the coin emerged thanks to the opportunity for employers to modify workers' duties unilaterally on condition that new tasks are compatible with their level. Of course, flexibility increased and went beyond employment contracts and employers were able to act unilaterally, hampering the use of special 'vouchers' to pay seasonally (and at least daily or weekly workers).

In this context, both low- and high-skilled young people are paradoxically in the same quandary: the former due to their lack of skills, the latter due to a mismatch between their level of education and job opportunities.

The issue of youth unemployment has become central to the public debate in recent years and received the attention of policymakers. Almost daily, major national newspapers, magazines, and other mass media talk about cases of young unemployed people or young people with precarious jobs. Furthermore, the mass media rhetoric emphasises the 'brain drain' from Italy to other countries, speaking about the resurgence of Italian emigration (Ricucci, 2017). In recent years, internal mobility has increased as well (Svimez, 2017), recalling another key issue in the Italian context in which territorial differences still matter in the field of labour market policies, opportunities, and supports.

In **Bulgaria**, the adaptation of the labour market to transformation processes in the economy and society went through many serious difficulties. In the 1990s, labour market policies responded mainly through passive measures, proposing low benefit levels and adapting the regulatory frameworks to reduce the flow of registered unemployed. After 2003, in connection with the EU integration process, there was a shift to ALMPs based on various programmes and interventions aimed at various target groups. After 2010, the proportion of measures addressing young unemployed increased. In 2013, implementation of the YGS started and in the following year, special measures supporting young people were launched under the Youth Employment Initiative.

The overall formulation and coordination of labour market policies is highly centralised, while local labour offices register the unemployed, pay unemployment benefits, and implement different ALMPs. The targeted programmes try above all to provide a chance for young people by facilitating their transition into working life. However, most of the measures do not prioritise the most vulnerable groups among youth, and the support provided is often limited in duration. Furthermore, ALMPs aimed at reducing youth unemployment often have a compensatory function because of deficits in other public spheres and have to adopt the role of a corrective mechanism with a wide coverage. This is particularly true for inactive young people with little or no education. To be effective, active labour market measures need to replicate the whole process of institutional socialisation that has failed in the past. Hence, active labour market measures achieve different levels of effectiveness depending on their target subgroups among the group of jobless youth.

In summary, despite differences in the national economic contexts and labour market policies, similarities can be found in the four countries, particularly in the mobilisation of efforts to implement ALMPs, the implementation of common EU programmes such as the YGS, and the balance between centralised impacts and local activities. Additionally, in all four countries, young people cannot count on an organic, national, policy framework dedicated to them. Although younger generations are targeted by various initiatives, both legislative and operational, policy tools aimed directly at young people often have to be sought in the cracks among different, more general, measures. For example, these refer to the school system, the labour market, housing, and social policy in general.

Aims and research questions

Since 2008, the global financial crisis has affected specific employee groups; among these, young people and immigrants can be considered to be the most vulnerable. Indeed, scrutinising policies across several European countries reveals that young people have increasingly become the target group for ALMPs in numerous countries (O'Higgins, 2015; Pastore, 2017; Bjørn et al, 2019). In hard times, the role of public policies in supporting unemployed people is crucial (European Commission, 2017). The set of policies that can be taken into account range from activities in schools to orientation services, from counselling support to specific initiatives within the employment centres. Availability of such activities matters significantly in favouring

the insertion of youth in the labour market when they are developed in coordination with an updated institutional framework with trained operators and personnel in charge who manage such activities in the local contexts that have been reshaped so severely by the crisis (van der Velden and Wolbers, 2003; Breen, 2005).

In view of this, it is essential to investigate how labour market policy measures are assessed by young people; what, from their perspectives, are the main weaknesses? Which areas could benefit potentially from improvements? A comparative approach based on interviews with young people from four European countries is useful in addressing these issues. This chapter focuses on the subjective feelings about different labour market policies and about the functioning of labour market institutions expressed by young people. It also identifies which factors encourage young people to use the support of labour market institutions and which hinder or prevent them from using such support. Bulgaria, Estonia, Italy, and Poland are the case studies: this selection is driven by the differences in both the situation of youth on the labour market and the different political institutions and labour market approaches in these countries. The chapter also investigates how far members of the Facebook generation, growing up in the post-Cold War era within the trend of progressive EU enlargement and widespread European citizenship, are defining shared requests and ways of thinking that go beyond borders. On the contrary, what national and local traits still define the relationship between the policies introduced and their use among youth?

The main aim of this chapter is to analyse the subjective assessments of young people from four European countries regarding the support they have received from the state in periods when they were unemployed or looking for a job. Based on the theoretical background, previous research, and the national contexts, the main research questions guiding the analysis in this chapter are:

1. How do young people assess the labour market policies and the activities offered by employment offices?
2. What factors encourage or discourage young people's use of labour market institutions?

Answers to these questions have led to suggestions emerging from reports by young people on their experiences, together with their socialisation on the labour market in the family, at school, and/or within their peer group.

Data and methodology

The analysis in this chapter is based on interviews with young people conducted as part of the EXCEPT project. The empirical material is composed of 186 qualitative interviews conducted in the four countries concerned: 43 in Bulgaria, 53 in Estonia, 50 in Italy, and 40 in Poland (Table 11.1).

Among the 186 qualitative interviews, 97 are with young people who have been involved in ALMPs (21 in Bulgaria, 29 in Estonia, 27 in Italy, and 20 in Poland) and 89 are with young people who have not had experience of ALMPs (22 in Bulgaria, 24 in Estonia, 23 in Italy, and 20 in Poland).

From a methodological point of view, reference is made to the full sample in the four scrutinised countries: this takes into account both those who have been involved with public services or have participated in a specific policy addressed to them, and those who have never had contact with employment services. The arguments for including those who have been involved in active labour market measures are clear: the analysis of their attitudes, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction can enrich understanding of the correspondence between young people's expectations and their real experience. At the same time, in order to evaluate attitudes towards employment offices, it is also important to investigate why other young people have not engaged with the measures, whether as a result of a lack of available programmes, unwillingness, or other reasons.

Young people's assessment of labour market policies in the four countries

The interviews with young people from the different countries about their interactions with employment offices reveal similarities and differences. The following subsections compare and analyse the

Table 11.1: Number of interviewees according to involvement in ALMPs

| Involvement in ALMPs | Bulgaria | Estonia | Italy | Poland |
|----------------------|----------|---------|-------|--------|
| Involved | 21 | 29 | 27 | 20 |
| Not involved | 22 | 24 | 23 | 20 |
| Total | 43 | 53 | 50 | 40 |

nuances of their experience in different countries in regard to each research question.

How do young people assess labour market policies and activities offered by employment offices?

For most interviewees, evaluation of the programmes in which they were included is shaped mainly by the success they have in finding a job afterwards. Very often, young people express a positive attitude towards the training and internship opportunities they receive. However, they are disappointed when the end of the programme comes and they are without a job again. A number of interviews in each country reveal that the transition from internship provided by the state to employment is very difficult or impossible, especially in villages and small towns. Some Polish young people mention that the internship was neither in their field of specialisation nor did it lead to a full-time job contract. For example, Michalina participated in five internships organised by the poviats labour office. All of them were at the same local police station, but she still cannot get a job there and is waiting for one of the staff members to retire. In small towns with limited employment opportunities, the transition from internship into permanent employment is almost non-existent. The majority of respondents have had placements as interns in different public administration offices, but these offer only a few vacancies and very low employment turnover:

‘It’s like, some friend of somebody’s friend is going to leave the job, so they are already sending their daughter to the appropriate faculty, to graduate and to take this place.’ (Michalina, F, 26, HE, TE, PL).

Similar dissatisfaction with internships is expressed by Bronek, currently on an internship at the poviats labour office. When asked whether he is gaining new skills, he says:

‘I wouldn’t call this “learning”. All the things I am doing right now ... I could do before.’ (Bronek, M, 20, ME, U, PL)

Several interviewees in Estonia had received individual career training aimed at improving the efficacy of their job applications. Their evaluation is quite negative: this training focuses on fairly general aspects of applying for a job and in the case of applying for an actual

job, other factors such as former experience and education play a more important role. This is also reflected in the interviewees' opinions.

- I: Writing your CV ...
R: Yes, a sort of general stuff.
I: Was this helpful?
R: Well, maybe a bit for my CV although my CV was ok already before [the interviewee is referring to time before that training] ...
I: What about job interview training, was it useful for the interview?
R: I am not sure. In fact, it was the recruiter who gave me feedback [the interviewee is saying that it was not the case manager from the UIF who gave him feedback]. (Mati, M, 26, ME, U, EE)

Although interviewees do not see the training as very significant in the context of finding a job, it is still clear that opinions about training are polarised. Some of the interviewees are satisfied with the training, whereas others are negative. Those with a positive outlook see their experience as helpful and encouraging, whereas others consider it to have been a waste of time which had given them nothing useful. A positive experience is described in the following excerpt:

'Well, it was on how one finds a job, or something. How to put together a CV, communicate with people, search for a job, all this stuff. And this, this course, well it encouraged me indeed. That I indeed could search for a job and try and see what happens.'
(Helena, F, 23, LE, U, EE)

This interviewee did in fact apply for a job, and from the perspective of assessing the usefulness of the UIF service, the quote shows that it was an encouraging experience.

A negative reaction to a course offering information is expressed in the following excerpt.

- R: I have attended some sort of information lectures.
I: What do you think of those?
R: I think, these were a complete waste of time. One was some sort of handicraft; I have no idea why I was sent there. And then another one was on entrepreneurship. Hm. But this too

was only some group play and games. And lasted four hours only, I gained nothing from there. (Marju, F, 27, LE, U, EE)

Obviously, this interviewee is not satisfied with the use of her time. Nor has she acquired skills that would improve her future outlook. And it is also clear that she did not benefit from the content of the course.

The EUIF also subcontracts training providers in specific areas such as beauty services (for example, hairdressing, cosmetics), construction, computer programming, and so forth. Unlike careers advice, general preparation for applying for a job and the like, these courses prepare unemployed people to perform specific jobs. The decision to finance attendance at a course like this will be taken jointly by the case manager and the job seeker after having analysed the job seeker's situation, competencies, wishes, and preferences as well as the labour market situation. Hence, it is only natural that the majority of interviewees express satisfaction with the professional training they receive.

However, a recurring theme in the interviews in Estonia is the jobseeker's expectation that they would receive training to improve/obtain specific skills such as coding or offering beauty services.. This theme emerges from interviews with some unemployed who had a fairly clear idea of the field of training they wanted to enter, whereas others did not express such a strong inclination toward a specific area. The areas the job seekers were interested in included, for instance, computer programming, beauty services, and entrepreneurship training. There was little interest in attending babysitting or customer servicing training:

'I have been applying for a training since [pause] January [given the date of the interview, it was two months ago] [pause] but I don't have these €1,500 to pay for the training. ... It is a programming school, it is [pause] HTML, CCS, Javascript, it is an introductory training.' (Mari, F, 29, HE, U, EE)

Some of the interviewees express discontent with the content of the courses they had attended, because they found the courses useless in terms of acquiring concrete skills that would help them get a job:

'Through the EUIF, I took part in a training course on entrepreneurship. It was useful, in some sense, but at the same time I had a feeling as if sitting there had been a waste of time. Well, anyway, it was at least some activity.' (Toivo, M, 28, ME, U, EE)

In Italy, among young people with a low level of academic qualifications and an impoverished family environment, a certain vagueness emerges when they speak about policies, social benefits, and social welfare. Often these issues are met by strong statements and negative feelings that turn out to be inaccurate or based on word of mouth.

Young people frequently give up on relations with special services, on initiatives that could help them, because they are conditioned by a negative prejudice that focuses on the importance of social ties: the latter supports are seen to be more helpful and reliable than the guidance guaranteed by public institutions. Employment services appear to be living on another planet. Young interviewees report the discrepancy between their daily lives and the suggestions they receive from job counsellors. In a rapidly changing labour market environment, employers pay attention not only to formal education but also to the wide range of soft skills that can be developed through various experiences.

Some interviewees in Italy cite friends' negative experiences with the employment services. These stories have increased young people's disillusionment with public institutions, and they hark back to a kind of golden age in which students found jobs just after having got their diplomas.

Nonetheless, those Italian young people who – thanks to an active employment policy (for example, the YGS) – were able to turn the corner in their professional lives are very satisfied. For 24-year-old Margherita, the Youth Guarantee experience was a turning point because it gave her opportunities and self-confidence.

'It gave me a little more confidence than just going in blindly [pause] the fact that they looked after me, that I always had someone to speak to about certain things gave me a little more confidence and made it possible for me to have a much longer work experience, instead of working for 4 days I managed to stay on for 6 months, that at least. And in fact, I worked in the restaurant there.' (Margherita, F, 25, ME, U, IT)

It should be underlined, however, that several young people distinguish between YGS, which they appreciate because it is directed specifically towards them, and other more general related services. Whereas feelings about the former are mixed, the latter are, for the most part, roundly criticised.

One significant factor that shapes the youth assessment of ALMPs is the personal interaction of young people with employees in the

state institutions. Many interviewees in Estonia, for instance, express positive reactions to the EUIF services and case managers with whom they have been in contact. In particular, they say in the interviews that they appreciate the practical help they received in terms of finding a suitable job or a training course.

‘The EUIF has helped me so much. They guided and assisted me, advised certain training courses, helped to search for jobs and [pause] well, helped to consider which job I could apply to, what would be a suitable job for me. Altogether, the EUIF has helped me so much.’ (Maili, F, 18, LE, U, EE)

Some of the reactions are simply general assessments of the case manager. However, it can be difficult to distinguish between views about an actual case officer and the services offered by the EUIF. So, even if the interviewees mention only case managers, they could not have expressed this attitude outside the range of services offered by the EUIF itself, independently of the characteristics of an individual case manager:

‘They are very nice, trying to help.’ (Stella, F, 24, ME, U, EE)

‘A very nice consultant.’ (Anna, F, 29, HE, U, EE)

Sometimes, however, relationships external to the unemployment status and the relationship between an unemployed person and the EUIF might play an important role:

‘The current case manager, she came through family relationships, she firmly holds me trying to find me an easy life.’ (Peep, M, 25, LE, TE, EE)

A reaction that repeatedly surfaces from interviews in Estonia is dissatisfaction with case managers. This irritation addresses the level of enthusiasm and energy that case managers devote to helping and assisting the unemployed – it is often perceived as being too limited. According to some interviewees, case managers simply ask what unemployed young people have done to find a job, instead of offering adequate help and assistance to help them find a job.

‘But those experienced ones [the interviewee is referring to consultants] – so, what will you do? Will you write me an

application? So, you just leave and drop it there. It was just like that – I felt like writing an application that I want to give up totally. And there you just feel how you are regarded as inferior.’ (Aleksandr, M, 26, ME, U, EE)

Another characteristic of the counselling process at the EUIF that is mentioned repeatedly as negative is frequent changes of case managers. Quite a lot of interviewees mention that during the time they had been in interaction with the EUIF, their counsellor has changed several times. This means that each time a young person meets a new officer, she or he needs to start telling her or his story all over again right from the start. As a result, the meeting is spent on giving an overview of the situation, not on addressing substantive issues with the unemployed young person. However, for some, the change of counsellor has actually meant a positive change, because the new counsellor was more active and more eager to help the particular young person, and as a result, they found a job or a training course.

‘It turned out that I changed consultants five times and, in the end, a young girl, still an apprentice, was assigned my case. She was of my age approximately and we started to interact and communicate intensively and it turned out so that she very soon found a suitable training course for me. Without any problems at all.’ (Deniss, M, 28, ME, U, EE)

Several interviewees also mention that case managers are too strict with them, to the extent that may even be perceived as harsh. However, this perceived strictness and harshness is evidently a result of case managers following internal rules of service provision in the EUIF and their control over the counselling process.

R: Yes, I have now new case manager who is much harsher to me.

I: What do you mean, much harsher?

R: Well, she requires that I would do more when looking for a job, but I am very pessimistic about that [pause] In the first place, you see, I am not so very keen on listening to that boss and secondly, I would like to minimise working in my life. (Georg, M, 23, LE, U, EE)

Among the services the EUIF in Estonia offers are apprenticeship positions, voluntary work, and work practice. Although these jobs do not come with an employment contract, they still involve a

legal relationship between the person who does the work and the organisation that provides it. Although their main purpose is to support getting people ready for work, they also have the potential to evolve into an employment contract. These services receive a positive assessment from the interviewees.

The lack of adequate personal support tailored to individual young people in Bulgaria and the formalism and bureaucracy of the employment offices often explain the negative attitudes of young Bulgarians:

‘The assistance provided by public employment services is inadequate. Services are not personalised and do not take into account both health condition and individual preferences of the job seeker.’ (Mira, F, 24, ME, U, BG)

‘Well, because the organisation itself so to speak is one system that simply is mostly doing nothing or offers you some jobs that you’re not interested in, you have no desire, and they say – well we had offered him – he does not want anything.’ (Kiro, M, 28, HE, PE, BG)

Young Bulgarians who have engaged in policy measures share some positive and some negative views about the programmes. The evaluations of the various ALMPs depend on the personal experience, prospects provided, and the relevance of the program to the young person.

When the programmes provide job opportunities which match the young person’s level of education or training, evaluations are positive.

‘Definitely positively, because, I suppose you know that when you graduate it is very difficult to get a job because most employers require you to have some experience, on one hand. On the other hand, they want you to be young. This is pretty hard, so I’m glad there is such a programme and thanks to it I could find work.’ (Daria, F, 22, HE, PE, BG)

When the programmes are short term and provide no follow up, they are often considered meaningless and just ticking boxes. Negative views are often related to doubt about whether the programmes will lead to job offers.

‘Yes, I think that I need more security [pause] I think it’s important to have security in your personal life and at work, because it has

a very big impact on the human psyche and way of life. As an employee of the programme, I have a job for nine months, yes, I have a job that I like, which is not irrelevant. Any contracts, it is not specifically about contracts, but it is another thing to know that you are in a permanent job, and another thing to know that you are under a programme. Things are different.' (Donna, F, 24, HE, TE, BG)

'Duration, yes [pause] It is something which I'm worried about because after that it is not clear what is going to happen [pause] I have to go through the same path [pause] to register myself at the employment office, to get an unemployment benefit and after that [pause] uncertainty.' (Katya, F, 29, HE, TE, BG)

Still, the most common reason for negative assessments of ALMPs and labour offices in Bulgaria, both for those involved with them and those not involved, is the low pay.

'Young people can find a job, but existing jobs are not well paid. Remuneration is not sufficient and adequate, and, therefore, these factors prevent young people from making a decision to establish their own families. As another option, unfavourable labour market conditions force young people to leave the country in search of better working conditions and higher salaries [pause] The public authorities at central and local level [the municipality] can change this situation, but in fact are not willing to do that: Where there's a will, there's a way.' (Koko, M, 27, HE, TE, BG)

What factors encourage or discourage young people's use of labour market institutions?

One common feature of the interviewees from the four countries is that few of them met the eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits or other forms of social support when needed.

Very few Polish interviewees were receiving unemployment benefits (PLMPs). The eligibility criteria seem specifically to limit access to this form of support to young people or recent school leavers. Unemployment benefits are available for a person who has been employed for at least 365 days during the previous 18 months, paid all social contributions, and received at least the minimum wage. The amount of unemployment benefit varies slightly depending on previous tenure; however, the maximum level of unemployment benefit is

around 800 zł (which is about 40 per cent of the minimum wage) for the first three months, and then it decreases by 20 per cent. What is worth mentioning is that the amount does not depend on previous earnings and is based on the minimum wage.

R: Last year, for sure [pause] I was getting the benefit for half of a year.

I: And then after this half-year benefit, did you have some other form of support? [pause]

R: No, they were just calling me, asking whether I'm looking through the offers, and I do, but nobody wants me. (Konrad, M, 23, ME, U, PL)

The following interview extract is an example of the relationship between young people and the employment office in Italy. Dario, a young 28-year-old man, lives in Catania (in Southern Italy), is highly educated, and has a permanent part-time job:

'That's pretty much the million-dollar question [smiling] in the sense that I think we'll try for a while to find the perfect recipe. I don't know, I would not be able to respond with an honestly great idea, because then I think that the difficulties, in this historic phase, are also linked a little to economic difficulties in general. In times of economic prosperity maybe, you know, one thing leads to another.' (Dario, M, 25, HE, TE, IT)

Only very few young people in Bulgaria receive unemployment benefits due to the inadequate and restrictive eligibility criteria. Some of the young people who have children of their own receive child allowances (family benefits) but these are considered very low.

'Children allowances are 37 leva [around €19] and do not cover even kindergarten. They cover nothing. Absolutely nothing. At least they should make them so that you can pay the fee in kindergarten. There are paid 60 leva per month, and they give 37 leva and now the food at school has to be paid and when you don't have maternity allowances [benefits during maternity leave for a child] and very low minimum wage.' (Tina, F, 28, HE, U, BG)

Others receive heating support in the winter:

'We received once 130 leva and after that 260 leva. This is a total of 400 leva per year for heating support. In winter we pay 130 to 140 leva per month for electricity.' (Vania, F, 23, ME, U, BG)

However, some of those interviewed doubt the opportunities to receive social assistance, because this is connected with certain conditions that should be covered.

'Then they will send me 15 days to sweep streets in order to continue to receive aid. The bad thing is, that there is nowhere to drop off your child, thus you cannot go to sweep. Otherwise, I receive 37 leva for the bigger child and 50 leva for the smaller one. A total of 87 leva [around 44 Euro] monthly. If the children do not have immunisation, I will not get even this money.' (Vania, F, 23, ME, U, BG)

'The adequacy of social assistance benefits is very low and at the same time beneficiaries are required to perform community service 14 days per month [pause]. This is [pause] in my opinion this is a mockery with the people's work.' (Victor, M, 28, ME, PE, BG)

The respondents from Poland rarely mention social assistance benefits and they do not seem to play any important role for them. However, for the majority of young people, obtaining free health insurance is one of the main incentives for registering at the local employment office.¹

Coverage of social benefits by the state during training and internships offered by ALMP is a very important factor in programme participation for some of the young people. In Poland, for instance, trainees in internship schemes, available for registered unemployed people for up to 12 months, get social and health insurance and a monthly remuneration equal to 120 per cent of unemployment benefits. According to some of our respondents, this is a very useful form of support.

'These internships here in our sector, it's a very good thing, because without such internship, to get somewhere straight away, it's probably really difficult. So, I think it's a cool thing. Me, myself, I really learned a lot during all these internships, really a lot. So, for me it was a very useful thing, because without it I don't think I would get in here.' (Ewa, F, 30, HE, TE, PL)

The same is true in Estonia: young people who have registered at the EUIF but do not want and are not planning to work turn down all

information on available jobs. The reasons this group give for registering at the EUIF include the availability of health insurance, unemployment transfers, and the possibility of receiving labour market training.

One of the main reasons that young people feel discouraged about using labour market institutions is their low level of trust that they will get any help from them. This attitude is found in the interviewees in all four countries.

Young Poles have low trust in public administration in general and hold negative stereotypes about employment institutions. Anna, like other Poles, is clearly unwilling to consider the services provided by the labour office, because she recalls the bad experiences of her father at labour offices, and does not count on any support coming from official sources. Gabrysia, for example, has not applied for housing allowance although she is entitled to it, because she has problems facing clerks at any public administration office:

‘Well me, if I am just supposed to go to some institution or just to some office, I just get sick three days before. So I just can’t manage all these things.’ (Gabrysia, F, 23, ME, TE, PL)

This might be a typical attitude inherited from the previous generation and parental experiences of socialism when public administration was mainly seen as a hierarchical and authoritarian element of state control and not as a client-friendly provider of public policy and support.

Moreover, young people who claim that they are not interested in seeking state support stress the importance of self-reliance in adult life as a form of independence:

‘Just a formality [registering as an unemployed in the city council]. If everyone would count on something, well ... no, I don’t count on it.’ (Gabrysia, F, 23, ME, TE, PL)

Interviewees in Estonia have mixed reactions to the information² on job opportunities that have opened up through the EUIF. One clearly articulated and common reactions to information on job opportunities is that “there is nothing suitable for me, no job I would be willing to take”. Reasons for not taking a job vary, however, and are often linked to the job seeker’s life circumstances; for example, mothers of young babies clearly have specific job requirements that are compatible with their care responsibilities.

Young people in Estonia searching for a convenient job and good working conditions are also selective about information from the

EUIF. Their job expectations include that they are interesting and exciting, easily accessible, carried out in normal working hours, and in a specific location.

Generally speaking, young people interviewed in Bulgaria do not consider labour market policies to be an important contribution to their well-being or likely to help them find appropriate jobs. Young people who are not involved usually assess these policies negatively:

'I will apologise for what I will say but [pause] in my point of view the state does not do anything.' (Milena F, 21, ME, U, BG)

'I do not trust public employment services [pause] I have many friends who are registered there [pause] but nothing happened.' (Boris, M, 26, LE, U, BG)

Some of the young people registered at the labour office have never been offered any programme or training:

'I registered two years ago and they never offered me anything.' (Valyo, M, 21, LE, U, BG)

'I've been registered for a period of one year and they still haven't suggested a job offer corresponding to my field of studies [pause] So I'm doubtful.' (Kornelia, F, 26, HE, TE, BG)

Others feel that programmes cannot offer what they need:

'If there is something and it will help me start working as a hairdresser or as a sous-chef at good pay, I would go.' (Valya, F, 20, ME, U, BG)

'No, I have not dealt with that [pause] It never crossed my brains to register. Otherwise, a friend told me to register there and I told him all right I will sign, but I didn't go [pause] I don't know them. I haven't got friends who found a job this way. I would take advantage of existing programmes provided I liked the pay.' (Stefan, M, 21, ME, U, BG)

'I know nothing about those programmes and I don't need them. I can't become a street cleaner because that's what you have to do following some kind of employment programme. I don't know what else they have to offer. I've heard something

about educational programmes that offer professional learning courses but the programme members are trained to become waiters, cooks, or to get computer skills and I don't need those skills. A programme to help me find the proper internship corresponding to my education would be good for me now. If there is such a programme, but I don't know if there is any.' (Ani, E, 24, HE, U, BG)

A very decisive factor for participation in ALMP is the (lack of) information about the LM programmes and the opportunities given by the ALMPs. Most young people in the Polish sample have very limited knowledge of existing labour market policies, especially when they have no previous experience with labour market institutions. However, this changes when they are unsuccessful in searching for jobs themselves and they register at the local employment office.

R: I didn't believe that you can find work through the city council, to be honest.

I: And now something has changed, that sometimes it works out?

R: Well, something yes ... [laughs] [pause] There is this support for young people. There are many programmes, there are some vouchers, there is also this programme supporting employers of people below the age of 30 [pause] and there are these internships here, as well, also as a form of a support. (Łukasz, M, 29, HE, TE, PL).

In Bulgaria, there are grounds to believe that the main reason why the most vulnerable young people do not participate in measures and programmes offered by public employment services is their lack of awareness of the available options. Another reason why some of them do not participate is the belief that state support is for people in need who do not have any other means of coping with their situation.

In Italy, the lack of concrete information that is readily available and expressed in comprehensible (that is, not bureaucratic) and accessible language is often cited negatively. The employment service, in particular, is seen as remote from young people. In their perceptions, these services are rooted in the past, whereas serious employee training efforts are needed.

Indeed, young people in Italy do not really understand what employment services do and, in general, they think that there is a lack of information about the policies and benefits that might be available.

‘There’s an unbelievable queue [to gain access to the employment office], you have to be there at 7am to register in two minutes [pause] If it was online it would be easier, but [pause] and [pause] there are two employment offices, it depends on where you live, and [pause] What can I say, you register [pause] I don’t really understand what they do, I mean, ok, they register you, but then.’
(Margherita, F, 25, ME, U, IT)

Discussion

There are a number of similarities in the opinions voiced by young people starting with a lack of trust in institutions. It is evident that young people do not rely too much on the help received from labour offices. Part of this might be explained by the general distrust of public administration, negative stereotypes regarding the functioning of these institutions, and insufficient knowledge about available policy measures. On the other hand, young people assess the activities of the labour offices on the basis of the results achieved. If and when an adequate job is offered, young people seem ready to forgive institutions for their weaknesses. However, when the interaction does not result in an adequate job offer, the purpose of the interaction remains obscure and this leads to negative assessments.

It is important to underline that in all the countries under scrutiny, there are young people among those interviewed who are involved in specific programmes offered by the labour offices and they are satisfied with the support provided. However, these are usually exceptions and not the rule. Second, such personal histories are not well known and could hardly be used as examples by other young people. Another common problem concerns the scarcity of concrete information that is both readily available and expressed in accessible language. In several cases, young people who have been in touch with local labour offices stress the bureaucratic ritualism and excessive focus on rules and regulations as a barrier to the effectiveness of these institutions. Furthermore, several public operators confirm numerous critical points in the performance of their work. Criticisms include the impersonal approach and unhelpful support from advisers. Often, young people receive job offers that do not match their qualifications or their specific personal situations – for example, a car mechanic receiving a job offer for unskilled manual work as a house renovator, or a young mother with small children offered work in a liquor store open at night. One particular issue linked to this point and raised by various interviewees is frequent changes in employment advisers in the course of the process.

Demand was widespread with regard to expectations in receiving specific, concrete and helpful training. This is especially relevant for some interviewees who have a fairly clear understanding of the field of training they would like to enter. Nonetheless, even those who do not have clear expectations regarding a specific kind of training expect a training to not just be for the sake of the training, but that it should lead to an appropriate job offer. When that does not happen, evaluation of the activities of labour offices is quite negative. Most of the young respondents stress the need for better educational counselling to help them to choose the right educational path according to their skills and attitudes.

Another interesting theme relates to counselling practices: according to many interviewees in all four countries, services should be more focused and address teenagers in schools; and the high school and university curriculum should give students more practical experience and prepare them better for the labour market. Asked what they would change, several point to the need for university studies to be better adjusted to the labour market, and for a greater exchange of experiences between employers, students, and universities. On the other hand, many interviewees find that labour market institutions are somewhat outdated or obsolete, and that more dynamic and innovative approaches are needed to transform them into more client-friendly and modern institutions.

Young people stress the level of benefits and the difficulties in gaining them due to bureaucratic barriers. In some countries (Bulgaria and Estonia), this happened in a very explicit way while, in other cases, in a hidden way (Poland and Italy); in this last case, it mostly regarded interviewees involved in specific programmes. It has to be said that some young unemployed people are pressurised into registering at labour offices for other purposes than finding work, for example, to gain health insurance, to receive child allowance, heating support, and so forth. However, this hardly contributes to better assessments of the work of the employment offices. Rather, this is seen as an obligation to be met, but assessments depend on offering an appropriate job.

Interviews therefore reveal that both male and female young people in all these countries have rational expectations of the labour offices: (a) that they should receive an offer proposing an appropriate and good quality job, or training followed by an appropriate job offer; and (b) that interactions with staff in the labour offices should follow established standards for quality work with a client-centred attitude, clear concern,

and helpful advice tailored to their personal situation. These are also the basic directions for improvements in the studied field.

Conclusions

This chapter extends the literature on school-to-work transitions by investigating the role of policies in support of labour market insertion. It contributes to the literature on policy evaluation in three respects. First, previous comparative research has often evaluated policies in terms of their outcomes. This study uses qualitative material based on policy recipients' experiences, thus allowing a more dynamic analysis of how the issue of having (or not having) a job interplays with other crucial issues. Second, the use of interviews carried out in four countries with the same questionnaire makes it possible to compare and contrast perceptions on the same topics while controlling for potential context effects on the interviewees.

Finally, although the relationship of youth labour insertion to social and gender inequality has been a central issue in this research field, the perspective of the unemployed has been largely neglected despite several EU policy documents and initiatives developed to address them (European Commission, 2012, 2014).

Regardless of the different national contexts, many similarities emerge across the sample when young people from the four different countries assess labour market policies and the activities of labour offices. In addition, although some nuances are derived for the different countries, it should be stressed that experiences are problematic in all four countries. In every country, personal contact with staff in the labour offices are often unsatisfactory; few young people are motivated to turn to employment agencies. Offering appropriate or relevant and good quality jobs is crucial here. Crucial for policymakers, however, should be findings that confirm a lack of trust in state institutions to help improve young people's situation and help them find jobs. Many interviewees describe employment offices as the last place they would go to look for a job. In some cases, the negative attitude is based on the opinions of friends and family rather than on any personal experience. Despite this, many interviewees share that they have been registered in the employment office for a long time but never received a job offer or any kind of support. At the same time, many young people do not know about the existence of programmes and measures that the state offers to facilitate inclusion in the labour market. Supporting young people toward labour insertion means working on different levels and with a wide range of actors and institutions.

The educational paths and the business organisations, local youth services, and all the departments (from housing to financial aid for setting up a new business) should be involved in planning and updating coherent and coordinated policies. Among these, it is inevitably the educational system that young people stress. Indeed, even when expressed in different ways, the core message is the same: if policies are to be efficacious, it is important to look at school and its role in training students in the right skills, and the need to update school curricula in line with the skills and competencies needed in a changing world.

However, it is not just schools and the labour market that appear to be separate worlds for young people. In all four countries (and in others, according to the literature), it is the school system that is failing to supply a solid cultural basis offering knowledge and competences for interacting with a complex, rapidly changing, and unpredictable world of work. In addition to the need to update teaching programmes, guidance services should be implemented to spread both knowledge and awareness of how helpful various services, initiatives, tools, and opportunities can be, and to try to overcome the perception that it is only *social connections together with someone's influence that matter*. The interviewees seem to have clearly understood that there is a need to go beyond bureaucratic scrutiny of education, and they stress the importance of recognising informal educational and work experience (for example, odd jobs, voluntary work) in developing professional skills. The feeling of being mistreated and undervalued in both regular and irregular jobs is another theme that cuts across interviews in all four countries.

In the already negative scenario depicted in the interviews, things are potentially even worse for those in certain groups. The situation of those who are NEET or belong to specific risk groups such as immigrants, people with disabilities, or part of the minorities who are often unwelcome in certain countries appears more complex than that of young people who have diplomas or degrees and who do not suffer from multiple institutional discrimination. To the recipients, employment services seem ill-prepared to overcome stereotypes and develop more friendly and understandable policies in both their procedures (the way they train their operators) and their relations with entrepreneurs and other key figures on the labour market.

In summary, the findings highlight that labour policies must be able to address the circumstances and requirements of those they are intended to serve, and inform individualised and targeted practices based on the range of requirements of the young people involved: standard practices have not met the support needs young people who are unemployed or

in insecure employment. The services provided are simply perceived as bureaucratic and remote from the young people they are designed to serve. Finding a balance between individualised practices and cost compatible with public spending is the real challenge facing many countries in the coming years.

Notes

- ¹ In Poland, registered unemployed people can still use the public health system, and this is considered a measure of protection. Few people in our sample used this as an additional benefit while working informally as manual workers in small factories.
- ² Through online portals, emails sent directly to registered unemployed people, information delivered at the counselling sessions, and information obtained at job fairs.

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