

Open space

Education and transition to work

Youth unemployment is running at 20.7% - a very high level. And yet young people are key to the EU's future prosperity.

The 2020 objectives include a reduction to 10% of the number of minors dropping out of school, says *Marie-Anne Paraskevas of the European Commission*.

Luca Scarpiello, board member of the European Youth Forum, a platform gathering 99 youth organisations

Scarpiello – who is young - says the Forum's mission is "to make sure we avoid alienating the young. This generation must believe it can improve its future. At stake is the autonomy of young people, and poverty destroys any possibility of autonomy."

Twenty years ago, Scarpiello says, you studied, then you got a job, then you started a family. Nowadays young people can go abroad and they can continue their education far longer than before: any strategy must therefore be multi-dimensional.

He stresses the importance of a "transition" period for young people. "It gives them a chance to approach the labour market with confidence and thus become active citizens."

The Youth Forum is pushing for a "youth guarantee" that would guarantee training or a job opportunity within four months of graduation. He says internships can be a poisoned chalice: they should be an educational experience and possibly a stepping-stone to a job, but too often that isn't the case and young people get trapped in a series of internships leading nowhere.

“We must understand,” Scarpiello says, “that investing in young people is key to leading us back to growth and to making Europe a better place. If the transition period lasts until the age of 40, we are putting our social models at stake. We have to activate this generation and not allow it to be structurally inactive.”

Anthony Camilleri is project coordinator for EquNet (www.equnet.info).

The research carried out by EquNet demonstrates how higher education can fight social exclusion. They are soon to publish the results of a year’s study into issues of equality and inequality in higher education, and want to create a campaign around these results. “We don’t want to see them lying on some desk growing old”, Camilleri says.

EquNet research results show that access to higher education in Europe is far from equitable, with no exceptions in any country. Socio-economic background plays a pivotal role, and parents’ education level. Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Finland are the countries to have consistently invested in education and the scene there is fairer.

“The re-skilling of the workforce is closely linked to equity, and our economic recovery is an issue of equity,” Camilleri says. “We must increase the supply of graduates and we must invest in public funding today.”

EquNet’s suggestions:

- Coordinated action at European level towards equity in higher education
- Enhanced coordination between access to education and employment policy.

- We must tweak funding instruments. For instance, we could set aside part of Erasmus funding to pay the travel costs of poorer students.
- As far as **public funding** is concerned, EquNet says we need to increase funding for adult learners, for instance by offering preferential loans to students with families; increase places for under-privileged people; counsel young people about the importance of higher education.

Food for thought:

- How can we change cultural attitudes to higher education among the lowest socio-economic groups?
- How can we convince adult learners to take up higher education?
- How can we go about enhancing the role of civil society?